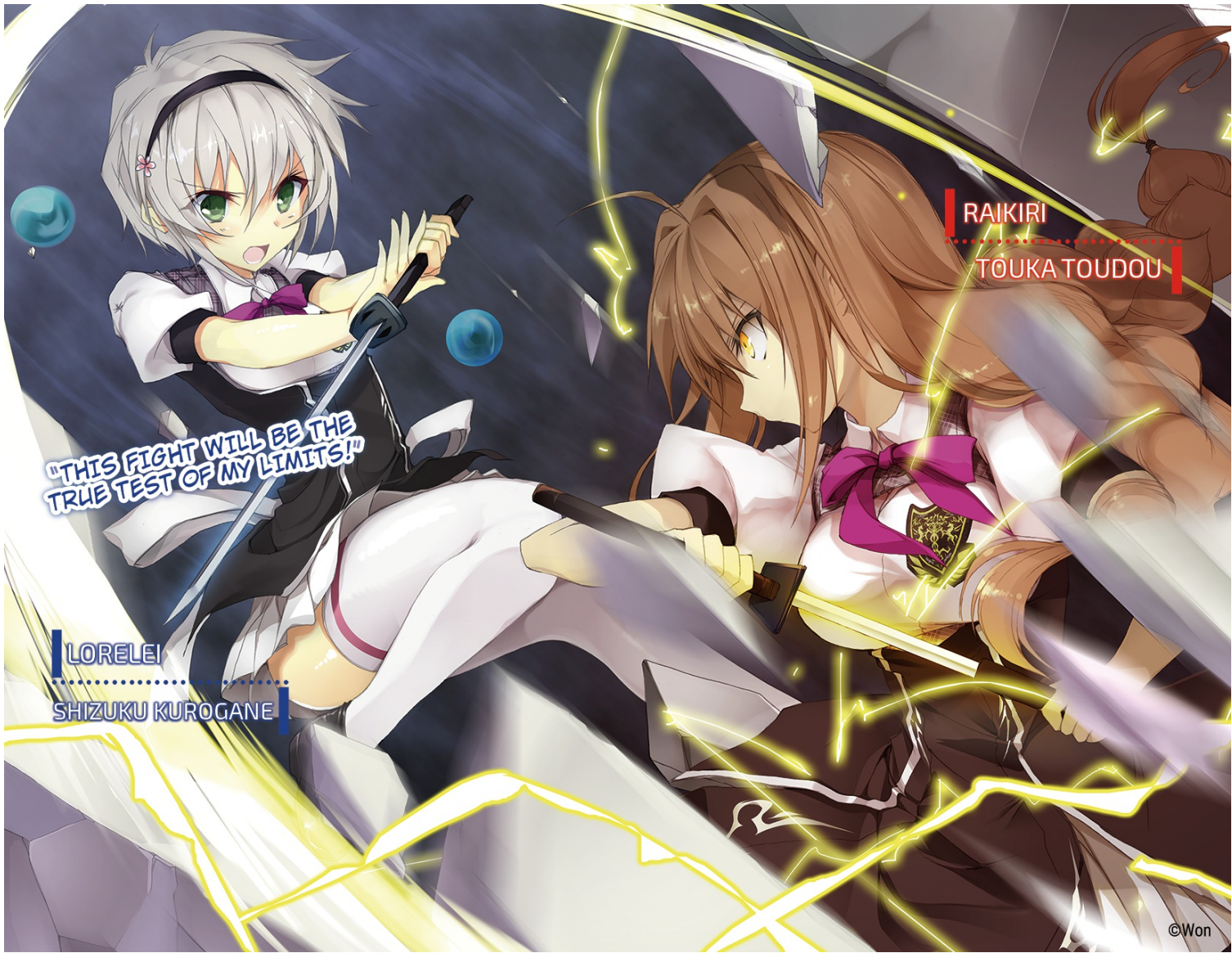




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"THIS FIGHT WILL BE THE
TRUE TEST OF MY LIMITS!"

LORELEI

SHIZUKU KUROGANE

RAIKIRI

TÔUKA TOUDOU

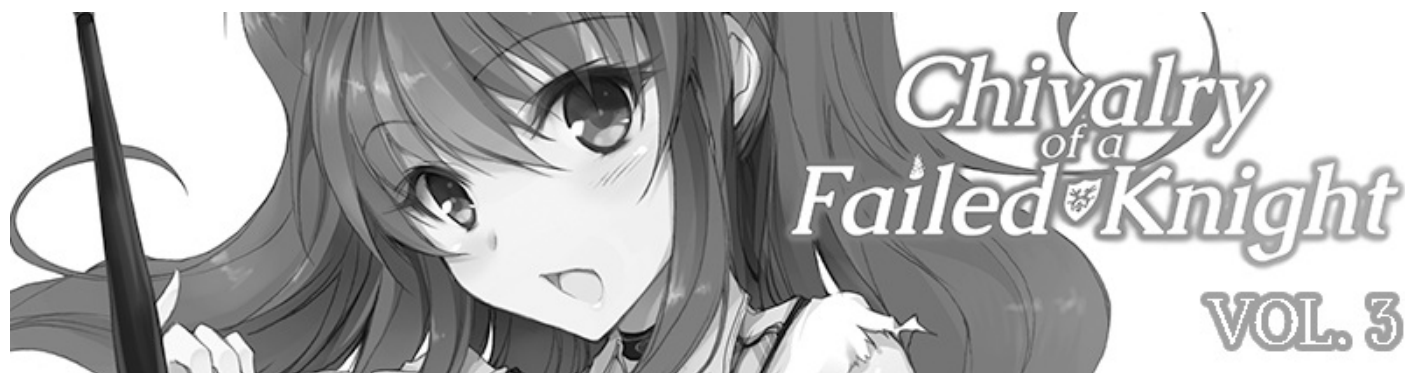




KUROGANE FAMILY HEAD

IRON BLOOD

ITSUKI KUROGANE



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue: Shizuku's Challenge](#)

[Chapter 1: Lorelei vs. Raikiri](#)

[Chapter 2: Mystery in Okutama](#)

[Chapter 3: Worst One in Duress](#)

[Chapter 4: Cutting the Gordian Knot](#)

[Epilogue: Another One](#)

[Afterword](#)

Chivalry *of a* *Failed Knight*

VOL. 3

Original Story by Riku Misora

Illustrations by Won



Prologue

Shizuku's Challenge

Shizuku Kurogane reminisced about her days as a child.

No matter what she did, be it hit other children, steal their toys, or even break the toys she stole, she was always forgiven. Why was that? It was because, even when she was young, her talent as a Blazer was clear.

"I'm sorry, Shizuku. You too! Say you're sorry!"

"Sorry."

The child Shizuku had bullied, a relative of hers, was forced to apologize after his mother whacked him on the head. It was a quivering, forced apology filled with repressed anger, but Shizuku merely glared at them with the same disgusted look she always wore.

Children who distorted justice in the face of power, adults who ignored wrongdoing in the face of power—everyone around her was exactly the same: worthless. They bowed down to the strong, expressing completely artificial gratitude and good will. It was a filthy sight.

That was the reason Shizuku came to hate the human race, even becoming fed up with her own self for being one of those worthless creatures. As she did, she took out her frustration on those weaker than her; it made her feel just a tiny bit better when she heard the cries of the beings she hated. But there was a boy—just one boy—who wouldn't allow her to do that.

Slap!

That boy, Ikki Kurogane, would smack her in the face when she made other children cry.

"You can't bully the weak," he would tell her.

At the time, Shizuku hadn't realized what had happened to her. Her parents

had scolded her before, but they had never laid a hand on her, so despite not knowing why, her cheek swelled and grew hot as tears flowed from her eyes.

“Apologize right now, young man!” the adults, red with rage, would scream at Ikki when they saw Shizuku crying. When he refused, they hit him, but Ikki never bowed his head. He had no reason to.

Shizuku had never met someone like him before, because nobody else had the guts to tell her when she was wrong. Though she cried from the shock of being slapped, she was actually happy. She didn’t want to be spoiled; she wanted someone strict, who honestly respected her as a fellow human being. She had always hoped to meet someone like him. It was then that she decided to follow his example, so that one day she might grow up to be different than the worthless adults she knew.

I had no idea back then.

She didn’t know the hardship of her brother’s world, or the solitude he was forced to bear.



“First-year student Shizuku Kurogane, your battle is about to begin. Please make your way to the arena.”

Shizuku slowly opened her eyes as she listened to the announcement. A dark passage lay before her, leading directly to the entrance of the arena. Without hesitation, she walked forward, continuing to reminisce.

Only after he ran away did I realize how much pain my brother was in.

As if he had never existed, nobody in the Kurogane family had bothered to search for him. That was when Shizuku had come to realize what her brother hid behind his gentle smile. She loathed the entire Kurogane family for how they had driven him away, and through her loathing, she came to a decision: If nobody else in the world would love Ikki, then she was willing to offer him all the love being deprived of him.

Accomplishing that was impossible the way she was, however. Constantly relying on him and following him around wasn’t the answer. Shizuku couldn’t save her brother if she couldn’t support him as an equal; she would end up

leaving him in solitude once more. She had no choice but to become stronger.

One day, Ikki would stand out from the rest of the world. Shizuku understood that, because she knew his strength better than anyone else. Still, she worked tirelessly, desperately, in hopes of becoming someone who could stand as his equal.

Eventually, she became strong enough to become a Rank B Blazer, but it wasn't enough. If Ikki was aiming to take the Seven Stars, then Shizuku wasn't quite ready to walk alongside him.

"Okay, everyone! Let's meet the fighters for today's twelfth match! From the blue gate, we have the little sister of Ikki Kurogane, the most popular knight this year! She's second-best among the first-years, trailing just behind the Crimson Princess!

"With fifteen matches fought, she has a perfect fifteen-win record! She'll trounce you even if your ability has an advantage against hers! Will she once again be able to use her outstanding magic control to drag her opponent into the depths?! It's Shizuku Kurogane, the legendary Lorelei!"

Shizuku exited the dim hallway and was immediately met with cheers echoing throughout the arena, but even the deafening cheers seemed so far away, for Shizuku was focused solely on the person standing before her.

"And from the red gate, we have the highest-ranking student knight in Hagun, bearing the title of student council president! In only her second year, she advanced all the way to the semifinals at the Seven Stars Battle Festival before losing to the soon-to-be Seven Stars King, Bukyoku Academy's Moroboshi. This year, however, she has once again taken the stage in the all-out war for the summit, with her invincible trump card honed more than ever!

"Speed that can't be avoided, sharpness that can't be blocked! Will her golden flash once again cut down her foe in the blink of an eye?! It's Hagun's most powerful and most beloved lightning-wielder, Touka Toudou—the Raikiri herself!"



Touka Toudou. Separated by about fifty feet, Shizuku fixed her eyes on her foe, whose hazel hair swayed as she moved. In doing so, she became certain. *I see. She's in a completely different league.*

Just standing near Toudou, the very air began to sting. The hair on Shizuku's body trembled, and she began to sweat as she was pierced by her opponent's dagger-like gaze.

Toudou's very nature was fundamentally different from that of everyone Shizuku had defeated in her previous selection battles. She was an incredibly powerful foe, one far surpassing Shizuku herself, which was exactly why Shizuku's blood began to boil with fighting spirit. She had been waiting for such an opportunity since she entered Hagun. A fight that would test the strength of her love.

Finally. A semifinalist from the Seven Stars seems like a worthy enough opponent for me. She was ready to prove just how strongly she loved her brother. Her feelings, her love, everything would be put to the test. *This fight will be the true test of my limits!*

"And now, today's twelfth match begins!"

As if in response to Shizuku's mounting passion, the buzzer rang, announcing the start of their battle.



Chapter 1

Lorelei vs. Raikiri

Lorelei versus Raikiri.

Both were among the strongest Rank B knights in the school, but the battle between the two behemoths was off to an unexpected start.

“Wh-What’s this, I wonder! Neither of them is advancing!”

The silver shortsword, Yoishigure. The katana, Narukami, waiting in its glossy black sheath. With their respective Devices in hand, the two fighters kept their distance as they each traced a semicircle around the arena. An entire minute had passed since the start of their duel, but their blades hadn’t crossed even once.

Meanwhile, the air in the venue was thick with tension. Over a hundred spectators were gathered for the battle between the two masters of war, all watching with bated breath.

“Neither of them wants to initiate,” the flame-haired girl next to Ikki, Stella Vermillion, muttered with a stiff voice.

“They’re just glaring at each other from a distance, sizing up their opponent’s actions,” Nagi Alisuin—Alice—said in response. “Two Rank B knights with power worthy of challenging the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Both Shizuku and the student council president have ways of attacking from across the ring. They’re both keeping their foe in killing range—the first to act thoughtlessly is sure to lose.”

“That’s one reason, but in this match, Shizuku doesn’t want to make the first move,” Ikki added. “Toudou uses the strongest close-range weapon out there: the katana.”

“Is that related to the trump card they were talking about a minute ago, Ikki?”

Stella asked.

“Yeah. That’s no exaggeration, either. It’s so powerful and so breathtaking that it became Toudou’s nickname as well. I’m talking about her Noble Art, the super-electromagnetic quickdraw, Raikiri.” Narukami, hung at her waist, and its sheath made use of electricity to create a magnetic field, ejecting the sword; the otherworldly speed and power with which she unsheathed her sword could rend even a bolt of lightning. It wasn’t a blow that the human body could withstand. It was certain to defeat any foe. “So far, she’s won every official battle she’s used Raikiri in, no exceptions. Once Raikiri is summoned, it’s curtains for her opponent. It’s the very epitome of a trump card.”

“Oh, but she was only a semifinalist, right? Doesn’t that mean that whoever beat her was able to get around Raikiri?”

“Not quite.” Ikki shook his head. “The Seven Stars King, Moroboshi, is a lancer. I saw the video of their battle, and he stayed outside of Raikiri’s range from start to finish. That means even the Seven Stars King is afraid of her Noble Art. There isn’t a single person who’s defeated her at close range. Anyone who gets near her is destroyed by her faster-than-lightning strike. Shizuku is well-aware of that, of course.”

“That’s why she isn’t moving, then?”

“Right. She’ll be on the defensive for the entirety of the battle. Shizuku’s specialty is long-range magic, so there’s no reason for her to intentionally step into a disadvantageous fight.” So Shizuku waited, time frozen, for the moment her opponent began her attack. “But if Toudou so much as flinches, the battle will explode into action.”

The very moment Ikki finished his sentence, Touka went on the attack.



With a sudden burst of energy, Touka bent her knees and leaned forward. She drove off the ground, shifting to top speed in an instant. Less than twenty yards stood between them, a distance she could close in the blink of an eye, but Lorelei wouldn’t stand and watch while she did.

Responding to Touka’s actions, Shizuku made her move as well. She was

ready, because she had been waiting for the moment Touka would dash forward.

“Freeze the earth, Toudo Heigen!”

The ground below her feet froze. The spreading ice reached the walls even faster than Touka could move, turning the arena into an ice rink. If someone dashed on an ice rink, they would, of course, slip, making it their only option to slow down. Driving Touka into such a situation was Shizuku’s ploy, and once accomplished, she immediately leapt into the next step of her plan: Noble Art: Suiroudan

When launched, the cannonball of water that emerged from Yoishigure’s tip would wrap around the foe’s head and make them unable to breathe. Firing three shots, common sense dictated that it would be impossible to dodge all of them on a field of ice.

Her foe was on another level, however; she was a being that had nearly reached the pinnacle of the Seven Stars. Somehow, Touka navigated the ice rink without slowing down. She had realized right away what Shizuku wanted her to do, so instead of stopping, she instead let herself accelerate further by sliding.

Weaving through the gaps between shots, she gracefully evaded Suiroudan. She then used the ice to her advantage to spin like a top and unsheathe her sword, aiming for the still-distant Shizuku as she sent a magic slash of lightning in the shape of a crescent moon gunning for her neck.

Touka had seen through Shizuku’s strategy, evading her fire and launching an immediate long-range counterattack. She had been visualizing her every move since the very moment she saw Toudo Heigen.

Shizuku had never experienced someone who could see through her so quickly and precisely, but she had assumed it would happen and planned for it. A moment before Touka’s lightning sliced through her neck, a hundred-foot tall wall of water shot up from between her and the attack, separating them. It was Shouha Suiiren, another of her Noble Arts. Stronger than a defensive wall of iron, neither projectiles nor electricity could pass through it.

Of course, Shizuku didn’t expect Raikiri to go along with her plans so easily—she was among the four strongest student knights in Japan, after all. Touka was

sure to attempt a long-range counterattack after being targeted by Suiroudan, so Shizuku had prepared the defensive wall in advance.

The lightning struck the wall of water, vaporizing the point of impact, but it wasn't able to break through. Shizuku had successfully repelled Touka's attack, but that thought lasted only a mere moment.

"Ah!"

When Touka saw that her attack didn't hit its mark, she wasted no time in unleashing two, three, *ten* more bolts of lightning. She was like a machine gun, firing wildly at her target. The foresight she'd displayed before was gone; she was attacking with brute force alone.

That didn't mean it was a thoughtless action, however. Touka was well aware of the advantage she held over Shizuku: the speed at which she could use her techniques.

To prevent her water from conducting electricity, Shizuku had to take care to remove every single impurity from every single molecule of water, making perfectly, completely pure. It was extremely delicate and precise work. In contrast, Touka's strikes required no careful management whatsoever; she only had to enchant them with lightning.

It was only natural that their speeds would differ. Touka had realized her advantage with only one attack, and that her continuous, lightning-fast assault would put Shizuku in the most difficult possible situation.

Her analysis was correct. Against the endless bombardment, Shizuku was forced to maintain her barrier. She had to focus entirely on using Shouha Suren to protect herself from the volley of attacks. Even so, Touka's powerful attacks with her superheated lightning blade were slowly but surely vaporizing the barrier, grinding down Shizuku's shield.

After dozens of strikes, the machine gun-like lightning destroyed the last of her protection. Touka swung Narukami once more, ready to deal the finishing blow, but something wasn't right.

"Huh...?!"

Her movements stopped just as she went to swing. Why? The reason lay at

her feet. Something had taken hold of her legs: a watery arm that had sprouted from the frozen floor. It froze as soon as it grabbed her, pinning her where she stood, and a shadow simultaneously appeared over her head.

By the time Touka had torn her line of sight away from Shizuku and looked up at the sky, it was too late. What she saw was a massive pillar of ice, falling at a terrifying speed from within any human's worst blind spot. It seemed close enough that she could touch it with her nose.

Everything was happening just as Shizuku had imagined it would. If Touka wanted to fight using the speed of her foresight, then Shizuku would fight with depth of hers. Touka had been led to believe that her speed gave her an advantage, that Shizuku was only able to hide in her shell and fight a defensive battle until she'd lost. All the while, Shizuku's magic had crept along the floor, creating an arm to restrain Touka. In addition, the steam resulting from Touka's attacks was used to create the pillar of ice that would soon crush her.

Three complex uses of magic, all at once. A normal Blazer couldn't perform such a feat, but Shizuku could. She had Rank A magic control—the highest level among all of humanity, even surpassing Stella Vermillion.

The falling mass of ice split the entire ring in two, the resulting crack extending even to the audience's seats. That was just how powerful the blow was. A gravestone of ice sat at the center of the destruction; Touka couldn't have possibly been standing after that. It was clear to all who the victor was.

Or so it should have been, but Shizuku could still feel the tension in the air, no less painful than before. As if confirming her fears, the mass of ice began to split in half, like a blooming flower. In the midst of it, Raikiri stood uninjured.

Both attacked, both defended. The area was left half-destroyed by their battle, but not a single strike landed. They were evenly matched.

The duel between Rank B knights had returned to its starting point: a staring match.



"A-Amaziiiiing! Such high-level offense and defense! I was put in charge of the play-by-play, but I couldn't even get a word in!"

The commentator shouted as if she had only just remembered that she was supposed to speak. Her voice seemed to lift the breathless audience's tension all at once, with shocked yells coming from all directions.

"Wh-What's with these two?! Are they really human?!"

"Man, the student council pres is crazy!"

"We already know that! She was a semifinalist! How the hell is that first-year standing up to her, though?!"

"Defend, counterattack, bluff, secret weapon—all in a matter of seconds! How many moves does she have?!"

"But the president was ready to handle all of it!"

"They're both monsters. This is what a Rank B battle looks like!"

"The crowd is going wild over their fight, and it's no wonder! Strength, skill, and tactics alike are being displayed at levels much higher than any normal student could achieve! These two are the real deal! I wouldn't be surprised if either one of them became the Seven Stars King!"

"All this fighting, and yet zero damage has been done! There's not even a single scratch on either of them! You know what they say: 'Diamonds can only be cut by other diamonds'! Who will the goddess of victory favor today, folks?!"

"Shizuku's doing great!"

"I knew she was strong, but this is surprising, even for me!"

Like the hosts, Stella and Alice were in awe of Shizuku's fighting. Her opponent was the strongest knight in all of Hagun, a girl who was in the semifinals of last year's Seven Stars Battle Festival. Shizuku keeping pace with Touka proved that she was strong enough to fight on even footing with the beings at the very top of Seven Stars.

"If she keeps this up, she might be able to win!" Stella cheered, full of excitement.

Though they often snapped at each other, Stella didn't hate Shizuku. In fact, their love for the same man led to a sort of mutual understanding, and for that, from the bottom of her heart, Stella was truly happy. Shizuku was doing more

than enough to win, despite her foe having the elemental advantage.

The outcome of their match was unclear; there was a great possibility for a major upset. However, beside the two whose hearts swelled with anticipation, Ikki Kurogane alone watched the arena with apprehension.

Are they really evenly matched?



“They really are well-matched, eh, Kanata?”

“It seems so, Vice President.”

Two members of Touka Toudou’s student council—Utakata Misogi and Kanata Toutokubara—observed the fight from just above the red gate, opposite Ikki’s seat above the blue gate.

“These first-years are amazing. They’re so strong it’s hard to put into words. If they decide to be delinquents, we’re the ones who’ll have to stop them, y’know?”

“Heehee. Your cries seem more joyful than anything. This means we can graduate without worry.” With a voice as elegant as a bird’s song, Kanata smiled and once again looked out from beneath her wide-brimmed hat at the first-year who fought on even footing with Touka. “It’s truly a surprise, though. Who would have expected her to be able to compete with our princess like this?”

“Right? I can’t see a single advantage or disadvantage on either side. It’s not just Kurogane and Stella; these first-years really are incredible.” Utakata acknowledged their ability with a cool, composed smile. “At least, this one is when it comes to long range.”

That was the reason Ikki looked so concerned. There was one truth to be gleaned from their initial trading of blows: Touka would absolutely dominate Shizuku in close-range combat. There would be no way to defeat her if it came to that. In other words, Shizuku Kurogane’s chance at victory lay solely in staying far away—keeping pace wasn’t good enough.

If she wanted to win, Shizuku needed to get a leg up on Touka offensively. She

knew that, but she couldn't land a single damaging blow. Their exchange may have ended in a draw, but in the grand scheme of things, it was clear who had really come out on top in the first skirmish in the battle between Lorelei and Raikiri.

“Even worse, Touka isn't fighting seriously yet.”

For a Rank B knight, Shizuku was a first-class water mage with Rank A magic control. One would be hard-pressed to find a talent like her even at the Seven Stars. She was a rare opportunity.

Instead of unleashing an all-out attack, Touka instead chose to do as Shizuku wished and remain at long range. She wanted to learn what a top-tier water mage's attacks felt like.

“Touka must be happy to be able to fight her before the Festival.”

“Indeed. She'll likely end this study session soon, though. Today's matches are far behind schedule, and as we know, the president isn't fond of delays.”



As Kanata had predicted, there was a change in the arena. At Touka's feet, the skating rink created by Toudo Heigen was beginning to spew steam—she was joule heating the ground with the immense electrical power within her, using it to neutralize Shizuku's Noble Art. Then, she lifted Narukami and pointed it at Shizuku.

The light reflecting off the tip of Touka's sword carried a powerful killing intent that Shizuku couldn't ignore. Her expression stiffened as that bloodlust pierced her heart, though the almighty pressure she felt was only part of the reason.

I don't understand. Glaring at Touka from afar, Shizuku was frozen with apprehension. Her foe's last move in their previous exchange assailed her with doubt. *How was she able to respond to my surprise attack? Can she see something I can't?*

Lorelei's magic control far outclassed Raikiri's. It was even a full level above the Rank A Blazer Stella's. She was right to have confidence in her camouflage; it was inconceivable that her opponent could have been aware of the trick she

was going to pull.

Even stranger, it had come from Touka's worst blind spot: directly overhead. Though many people could react to hints from behind them, it was a fundamental flaw of the human species that they could never do so to hints from above. Touka, however, had reacted as if it were completely normal, splitting the gravestone of ice in twain.

It was then, while Shizuku toiled over the mystery of her foe's abilities, that she suddenly saw Touka standing right in front of her, disturbing the air as she swung Narukami.

"Gah?!"

Her eyes grew wide with shock—it took everything she had to avoid screaming. Who could blame her? A fraction of a second ago, her opponent was dozens of yards away, but she had gotten close enough that Shizuku could reach out her arm and touch her. Of course, not before Touka's sword would slice into her.

"Ngh!"

She did not freeze up, however. Without a thought as to how she would catch herself when she fell, Shizuku threw herself backward, barely evading Touka's horizontal slash. Her body spun in midair, and when she touched her left hand to the ground, she detonated a high-pressure blast of water from her palm, launching herself far away from Touka.

Dodging the attack and putting distance between them was a calculated decision, but Shizuku had been forced to rack her brain to come up with such a daring move and execute it with composure. It left her in a half-panicked state.

I don't get it!

She couldn't comprehend what had happened. Touka hadn't left her sight for even a moment, yet somehow, with no sound or sign of movement, she had instantly closed the several-dozen-yard gap between them.

"Ooh! Careful there, Kurogane! That was quite the narrow escape! She was reacting to Toudou's attacks with ease earlier, so what's the deal now?! She almost looked like she was daydreaming!"

Did I lose focus? No, there's no way. Shizuku knitted her eyebrows dubiously. It shouldn't have been possible for her to lose focus in battle, but the announcer's words were proof that it appeared that way to others. Had she failed to keep Raikiri's attack in sight even though she'd had no trouble doing so before?

No matter what the case, Touka's last attack was problematic for Shizuku. She had to stay focused, lest she miss her assailant again, so she reminded herself to stay sharp, focusing her consciousness on her eyes. The next moment, however, she once again saw Narukami rapidly approaching.

"Bwahhh?!"

Given no time to dodge, Shizuku was helpless as her clothes were shredded by the attack.

"Whooooa, get a load of that! Shizuku Kurogane has taken a direct hit from Toudou's sword! And a deep one, at that! Could this be a fatal wound?!"

However, just as everyone began to think the match had been decided, Shizuku's body turned pale, then liquified and spilled onto the ground. The real Shizuku was already standing a great distance behind Touka.

"Wh-What's this?! A water clone?! Kurogane has beautifully evaded Raikiri's—Wait, what's this?!" The announcer's voice froze when she saw the stream of crimson running down Shizuku's arm. "Blood is dripping from her left arm! She didn't evade it completely, after all! Kurogane has finally been hit! The great Raikiri, Touka Toudou, draws first blood!"

"Rgh...!" Shizuku groaned, holding the slash wound on her left arm.

It's like she's teleporting. What sort of trick is she using? She had no idea what Toudou was doing to mask her movements, but the stream of crimson running down her arm made one thing perfectly clear: *I can't follow her movements!*

That was the beginning of the end. It became obvious to everyone that theirs was no longer an even match.



The scales had finally tipped in Touka's favor; Shizuku was fighting a purely

defensive battle, only able to run away. The approaching Raikiri was faster, though, and Shizuku's decreasing reaction speed was a major burden. She became more and more exhausted, eventually reaching the point where a stiff breeze would be nearly enough to topple her.

"What's going on here? At first, Lorelei and Raikiri seemed evenly matched, but now it seems to be taking everything Lorelei's got just to run away. How did she fall so far behind?!"

The play-by-play announcer was bewildered. She didn't know that Shizuku was unable to see Touka's movements, so there was no way for her to understand why the battle had become so one-sided. Even so, everyone present at the training field knew exactly who would emerge victorious.

"She should really just surrender."

"I guess the president was just too much for a first-year."

"And here I thought she had a chance at first."

"Huh? You leaving already?"

"Yeah. This battle's over. I mean, not like we didn't know the president was crazy strong, right?"

The venue had calmed significantly, missing all of the enthusiasm present at the start of the match. Really, no matter how incredible she was, Shizuku was just a first-year. How could the best knight in all of Hagun fall to someone like her? Everyone there was disappointed in themselves for having even begun to get excited over something so unlikely.

Among them, Stella spoke to Ikki, nearly groaning in dismay.

"Hey, Ikki? What happened to Shizuku?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look at her. Her reactions have obviously dulled."

"That's right, Stella. The president isn't moving any differently, but it's like Shizuku can't even see her."

Alice had noticed the problem with Shizuku's actions as well. Naturally, Ikki

had too, but he could see a little bit more than the rest of them.

“I think you’re right about that.”

“Oh?”

“Shizuku really can’t see her. I’ve seen something like it before.” It was when he’d met Nene Saikyou, the Demon Princess, just before his first selection battle. “Back then, Ms. Saikyou appeared in front of me without me even realizing it. I never stopped looking in her direction, but she was suddenly inches away from me. Whatever Raikiri is doing, it must be the same thing. Perhaps it’s some sort of martial art.”

“Ahaha! Nice one, little Kurogane. I’m surprised you noticed.”

When Ikki turned toward the voice that had descended on him from behind, he saw a girl in a beautiful kimono and a handsome woman in a suit, both making their way down the stairs of the bowl-shaped arena.

“Hey there. Been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Ms. Saikyou, Director. Why are you two here?”

“What? It’s not like we need anything. We just saw you here, so we wanted to say hi.”

The director, Kurono Shinguuji, answered Alice’s question. They merely came to watch a selection battle between two Rank B knights for fun, and called out to Ikki and the girls because of their fascinating conversation.

“Wait, are you saying Ikki was right, Ms. Nene?”

“Yep,” Ms. Saikyou nodded in reply to Stella. “That’s Void Step, an ancient technique combining breathing and footwork. If I had to describe it...”

“...Huh?”

Without warning, Saikyou seemingly teleported nearly twenty feet, stopping close enough to breathe on Stella. She then grabbed Stella’s ample breasts and held them up, massaging them.

“Eep?!”

“Like that, see? Damn, you’ve got big honkers. Soft, too.”

“Aaahhhhh! Wh-Wh-Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I figured mine would get bigger if I felt yours up.”

“If you want them to get bigger, feel up your own!”

“Look at my chest, stupid! What am I supposed to feel here?!”

“Why are you the one getting mad? *You* groped *me*!”

“I suppose you can already see through the trick behind Void Step, Kurogane?” Kurono asked, ignoring the two bickering girls, to which he nodded.

“Yes. If I were told to replicate it, I probably could.”

“Hey, Ikki?” Stella began. “What is Void Step, exactly?”

“Well, let’s see. Basically, since we humans are living things, we can’t perceive every single thing that enters our eyes and ears like machines can. The brain registers things and can recall them, but the consciousness doesn’t identify them. And that’s a good thing—if your brain was forced to take note of and analyze every single piece of sensory information it received, it would quickly overheat. Instead, the human brain tosses the lowest-priority information into the voids in one’s consciousness, making things easier by not recognizing this information at all.

“Void Step uses a special, highly specific pattern of breathing and footwork to allow a person to slip into these voids. As a result, Shizuku can *see* Toudou, but she doesn’t *know* that she can. Her brain and eyes definitely still perceive her enemy, but her consciousness is discarding that perception as unimportant information. That is, until she comes close enough to pose a major threat to Shizuku’s life.”

“Exactly right. You’ve studied well,” Kurono said, impressed.

Ikki’s answer had perfectly exposed the previously incomprehensible mechanism behind the technique that was plaguing Shizuku. It was the tiny periphery of unconsciousness that existed within the senses. By shifting one’s breathing and self by a half-step, Touka had slipped through Shizuku’s consciousness, preventing her mind from locking on. That was the method behind Void Step, an ancient style of stealth walking.

“I’ve seen this before, after all.” Touka’s Void Step was also much less refined than Ms. Saikyou’s, allowing Ikki to see through it more easily. “But I’m surprised a student could master the Demon Princess’ technique.”

“Well, there’s an easy explanation for that one,” Kurono told him. “Nene and Toudou both studied under the same knight—the very knight who specialized in Void Step.”

“Really? Who was it?”

“Torajirou Nangou.”

“Nangou? You mean the God of War?!”

The shock on Ikki’s face was completely transparent. The God of War, Torajirou Nangou, was a lifelong rival to Ryouma Kurogane and a senior knight who remained active even past the age of ninety. He was undisputedly a living legend.

“As I recall, you saw him at a senior citizens’ home and begged him to teach you.”

“Jeez, slow down, Kuu!” Ms. Saikyou piped up. “I’ve never thought of that old-timer as my teacher!”

“Why are you so embarrassed? I bet you only wear those clogs to imitate him.”

“N-N-N-No, I do not! I bought these because I saw an ad saying they’d cure constipation!”

“Acupressure sandals...?” As Ms. Saikyou’s long, hanging sleeves fluttered around with her waving arms, Kurono rebuked her temper tantrum, mentioning that “You’re never honest when it comes to him”. Then, she turned to look at Ikki again. “Well, anyway, if you know that much about how Void Step works, then I’m sure you also know that your sister can’t do anything to stop it.”

“What?!”

Stella and Alice raised their voices in disbelief at her matter-of-fact declaration of Shizuku’s defeat. Though Ikki’s expression was grim, he wasn’t surprised; he had already arrived at the same conclusion.

“Is that true, Ikki?! There’s no way to defeat Void Step?!”

“No, there is a way to defeat the technique itself. You have to intentionally focus your mind on your unconscious senses—on the voids in your consciousness. The problem is that it’s much easier said than done.

“For example, imagine there’s a man pointing a gun at you from straight ahead, his finger on the trigger. He obviously wants to kill you. Your focus would naturally be drawn directly toward the barrel, because that’s what has control over the last seconds of your life, right?

“Under those circumstances, would you turn your attention to the man’s earring? Would you think about who manufactured that earring? Of course you wouldn’t, because unnecessary information is completely ignored by your conscious mind. In order to defeat Void Step, however, you must turn your attention from the gun to the earring in that life-or-death situation. That is the act of focusing on your unconscious senses.

“Shizuku may as well be in a life-or-death situation like that right now. Intentionally removing her focus from her enemy would require specific training; she would need to be able to freely control both her body and senses at once. Honestly, she’s in a really tough spot.”

If she were Ikki or Stella, she might have been able to. The two of them had established full control of their bodies as a result of their learning martial arts.

Shizuku was different, though. She was the best of the best when it came to controlling magic, but an amateur at controlling her body. The moment she began to think that she was just overlooking Touka and tried to concentrate more on her, her field of vision narrowed, making the voids in her consciousness even larger. It created a vicious, endless cycle.

“I don’t believe it!” Stella cried.

Ikki didn’t want to imagine his sister’s defeat either, but as things stood, the chasm between the two Rank B knights was too large. The fact that Shizuku hadn’t damaged Touka even once stood as a testament to that fact. Even their battle at long range, where she excelled, had ended in a draw, and an even battle at long range was equal to defeat in the long run.

With her pinned down and the scales so far against her favor, it was hard to believe that she could win. Touka would close the distance between them once and for all, entering the close-range domain of Raikiri.

“If Shizuku has some trump card to fight Raikiri off at close range, she might have a chance. But if not...”

Ikki didn’t bother to say what would happen if that were the case, though Stella already knew what was to follow.

“Mmh.”

It was strange. To her, Shizuku was a rival for Ikki’s affections; she shouldn’t have been anything but a hindrance. Even so, Stella knew what Shizuku was experiencing as she fought, the strength of the emotions that supported her as she faced the challenge before her. The fact that they loved the same man made that feeling all the more potent.

“Shizukuuu! You can do it!”

A few small words wouldn’t be enough to turn the fight around, but Stella couldn’t bear to not shout those words.



Shizuku clearly heard Stella’s loud, beautiful voice as it echoed through the bored venue. It was the voice of her rival in love, honestly wishing for her victory, and hearing it made Shizuku clench her fists so hard the blood stopped flowing through them.

I don’t want your support! she claimed within her mind, feigning annoyance with an angry look while attempting to ignore the crawly, indescribable emotion deep within her heart.

If she were to acknowledge it, she believed it would change her relationship with Stella forever. However, no matter how much she tried to disregard it, Stella’s voice fanned the flames of her competitiveness.

Stella is sure to make it to the Seven Stars. I have to win and advance. I have to move onward to the Seven Stars, with my brother and my friends!

Stella was the only Rank A knight in all of Hagun, standing taller than even the

monster that currently opposed Shizuku. She wouldn't stumble over the small stepping stone that was the selection battles.

Ikki, the man who had defeated Stella, would surely make it to the top of the nation. Shizuku understood her brother's strength better than anyone else, so she harbored no doubts about that fact.

She couldn't allow herself to be the only one to lose. Her strength had been drained by the realization of her hopeless inferiority, but her fighting spirit raged stronger than ever. Casting healing magic on her own wounds, she stood up straight and glared directly at her enemy.

"What's this? Kurogane still hasn't given up on this one-sided battle! She's healing her wounds, standing ready to fight on! Has she found her chance at victory?!"

What Shizuku had found was not her chance at victory, but rather her determination. She couldn't perceive Touka's approach, nor could she understand the trick behind it. All she knew was that she was tired of it.

Defending had become pointless. If she couldn't see Touka's moves, her original strategy of pinning her down and fighting a long-range battle was out of the question; trying to run away would make the situation progressively worse.

The only path left to her was to go on the offensive. Her opponent was Raikiri, the greatest knight in all of Hagun. She was undefeated at close range, but it was the only way for Shizuku to win, so she steeled her resolve and strengthened her grip on Yoishigure.

I'll be the first to defeat her undefeated close-range attack!

Clueless as to what Shizuku was planning, Touka once again mercilessly stepped into the voids in Shizuku's consciousness, when suddenly, Shizuku moved.

"Byakuya Kekkai!" she shouted, stabbing Yoishigure into the frozen earth.

When the words left her lips, the ice created by Toudo Heigen instantly turned into a thick, white mist that filled the arena.

Shizuku had changed her perspective on the battle. If she couldn't see Touka,

then why let Touka see her? Considering that Toudo Heigen was already useless against the enemy's joule heating, Shizuku chose to sublimate the layer of ice, reducing visibility in the arena to a mere three feet.

The only one who could move freely in the magic mist was Shizuku herself. Though she couldn't see, the mist was like a part of Shizuku's body—she could feel everything and everyone that touched it. She located her enemy, who was standing still, at a loss for what to do, and immediately circled behind her.

“Hisuijin.”

In response to Shizuku's voice, all the water vapor in the air surrounding her moved, focusing at Yoishigure's tip to create a massive blade of highly pressurized, rotating water.

Water constantly dripping over a long period of time would erode massive boulders, and would cut through metal when made into a high-pressure current. One could even go so far as to say that Earth itself was carved by water into a sculpture. Nothing in the world cannot be cut by water, and Shizuku was using her outstanding magic control to condense the world-shaping power of Mother Nature into her blade.

Now, the true battle begins!

She dashed toward Touka, but it wasn't a reckless attack, for she was deeply assured of her victory. She still didn't know how Touka had seen her attack from above coming, but even if she saw Hisuijin and tried to react using Narukami, she would be unable to stop it.

No matter how sharp or well-crafted one's blade was, it made no difference. A solid couldn't stop liquid from flowing around it. Hisuijin would easily bypass Narukami and cut Touka down.

Shizuku already knew exactly how this would go, so she stepped in range of Raikiri with confidence in her heart. The moment she did, something caught her attention.

“Huh?”

Touka stood in the fog, her eyes fixed directly on Shizuku despite the low visibility. She was poised and ready to draw Narukami, visible lightning running

through its pitch-black sheath.

Shizuku knew what came next, for she had seen the blinding light unleashed by Touka's attack in videos countless times. It was her legendary trump card that crushed all foes before it with a single stroke.

"Raikiri!"

Plasma surged, instantly turning the world white with overwhelming heat, but having already set out for her final attack, Shizuku couldn't stop. She used all of her strength to swing Hisuijin, but the blade of water was blown away with Raikiri's speed alone.

Shizuku Kurogane's wish, along with everything else she had put into the battle, was cut down with a single sword stroke.



The moment the plasma-coated blade was unsheathed, its faster-than-sound slash detonated the air all around it. The raging wind it created, with Touka at the center, blew away the mist of Byakuya Kekkai. The aftermath reached all the way to the audience stands, making the split arena creak. It was so ferocious that one could hardly remain standing in the wind.

In the midst of those roaring winds, Ikki kept his eyes open, looking down into the arena. He saw everything, never averting his eyes until he was met with the sight of Shizuku Kurogane falling to the ground.

"A flash of lightning, and she's doooooown! The referee has crossed his arms, signaling the end of the match! Kurogane fought tooth and nail, but the semifinalist proved too great a wall for her to surmount! The winner of this Rank B deathmatch is the student council president, Touka 'Raikiri' Toudou!"

The host announced the victor, lowering the curtain on their battle. An intense, no-holds-barred fight. The beginning of the battle revealed just how much both of them surpassed normal students, but in the end, Shizuku lost hopelessly; she was never able to land so much as a single hit on her opponent.

"Hey, Ikki?"

"I know, Alice. I saw it." After his reply, Ikki stared at one point in the arena. It

was the fallen Shizuku's right hand, her fingers wrapped around Raikiri's ankle. Indeed, it was a complete loss for her. "Great job out there, Shizuku."

Shizuku was likely the one who most clearly realized the chasm of strength between the two, but she kept on fighting and fighting, refusing to yield.

You've gotten so much stronger.

Long ago, she was just a little girl who chased after Ikki wherever he went. Ikki had become more aware of the passage of the last four years than he'd ever been.

"..."

Ikki watched the victor flip her chestnut-colored hair as she walked out of the arena.

She's too strong.

Shizuku's last attack was far from reckless. Having used Byakuya Kekkai to rob the enemy of her sight, she'd had her most powerful Noble Art, Hisuijin, in hand. She had leaped into battle against Raikiri with all of her most potent tools and visualizing a clear path to victory, but it was all cut down by a simple, head-on attack.

Raikiri was able to counteract the strongest of fighters and the most well-thought-out of plans, far exceeding anyone's expectations. Ikki knew from his battle with Kuraudo Kurashiki, the Sword Eater, that the top of the Seven Stars was full of people like those two. Not a single member of that domain was normal; they were superhumans who had long surpassed normal measurements. It made Ikki think of how rewarding it would feel to reach that summit.

I'd like to cross swords with you sometime, Raikiri.



What followed the blinding, burning flash of light was benighted emptiness. Shizuku slowly regained her consciousness, dragging herself from the darkness.

She lifted her heavy eyelids, focusing her blurry vision. The first thing she saw was a bland, white, unsoiled infirmary ceiling, followed by the familiar face of

her roommate.

“Finally came to, huh, Shizuku?”

“Alice?”

Shizuku slowly lifted her upper body off of the bed. When she looked around, she noticed that other people were present as well. Ikki Kurogane—her brother—and Stella Vermillion were standing behind Alice. Upon seeing them all, Shizuku realized that she had failed.

Oh. I get it.

“Guess I lost,” she muttered, ushering in a depressed silence.

Don't worry about it. Be happy.

People who put themselves squarely in the competitive world knew how grim those words truly were. There were no words for losers in this world.

“Hey, Shizuku? Um...”

“I’m sorry.” Stella tried to end the painfully awkward silence, but Shizuku coldly interrupted her. “I’d like to be alone for a while, if you don’t mind. I’m still tired from the match.”

Shizuku hid her face and asked everyone to leave. She didn’t want to see anyone or hear anything. All she wanted was to be alone.

“Sure. Let’s go, Stella.”

“...Okay.”

Ikki quickly understood her intentions and left with everyone in tow. She appreciated that, for the pain of defeat had already caught in her throat. Shizuku was a prideful girl; she didn’t want Ikki or Stella to see her as she quivered with regret and sadness.

“Why are you still here?”

For some reason, Alice had stayed behind, a serene grin on her face.

“Why? Well, who knows?”

“I just said I wanted to be alone.”

“Yes, I’m not deaf.”

“Then just—!” Before she could finish her retort, Alice drew her into a hug. “Alice?”

“You were amazing out there. Your brother’s eyes were glued to you from start to finish. He said you did a great job.” Alice whispered as she gently ran her hand through the still-shocked Shizuku’s hair. “Shizuku, I’m not someone you have to put on a mask around. You don’t have to keep acting so tough.”

Ah...

That was her limit. Alice’s gentle words and protective embrace were enough to coax the first sob out of her throat, and once the first one had broken through the dam, the rest came flooding out.

Damn it. Damn it, damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it!

A broken wish. A failed dream. It all still tormented her.

Shizuku screamed in place of the pain that she wouldn’t put into words, clinging to Alice’s chest so tightly that her nails dug in. Alice didn’t pull away, though; she knew she was the only one to whom Shizuku could express her pain, so she stayed with Shizuku, holding her tiny body until the sobs finally stopped.



“Shizuku looked really upset.”

Stella spoke to Ikki as the two of them walked back to their dorm.

“Are you surprised? This probably destroyed her chances of getting to the Seven Stars.” Ikki had asked Ms. Oreki about it before the match. At the rate the selection battles were going, all six representatives would be people with flawless records. The national stage wouldn’t permit a loser. “But still, Shizuku has nothing to be ashamed of.”

Ikki remembered Shizuku’s right hand, holding Touka’s leg. The willpower she had displayed at the very end of their battle was especially spectacular.

“You can’t lose even once? That’s a lot of pressure.”

“Yeah. And we’re not exempt from that either, you know.”

Everyone—Shizuku, Ikki, Stella, and all the other students—was fighting under the same rules. No one aiming for the top of the Seven Stars would allow a single loss. That was the rule laid out by the new director, Kurono Shinguuji, in an attempt to proverbially pan for the new Seven Stars King.

They would find the strongest knight, even if it meant the school’s best had to crush one another. After all, only one person could stand at the top of Seven Stars.

“The selection battles are almost over,” Ikki continued. “We’d better brace ourselves for what’s to come.”

“I won’t lose, of course.” He turned to look at Stella, who oh-so confidently declared her victory. She looked back up at him in return, her eyes burning with fighting spirit. “I will not fail. You and I are going to fight in the finals of the Seven Stars Battle Festival, and this time, I’ll win.”

Ikki felt immense joy welling up from within him. He wasn’t the only one waiting eagerly for their chance to come.

“Me too, Stella. I won’t fail either.”

“Heehee, of course not. You know you’ll catch hell from me if you drop out halfway through♪”

Stella responded to his determination by flashing him a beaming smile. He couldn’t help but grin too; she was more charming than ever.

The more Ikki knew about her and the closer they became, the more he fell in love with her. The scent of flowers around her, her high body temperature—it was all charming in its own way.

In his desire to be loved even more by Stella, he was more motivated than ever to work harder than ever. He could push himself to greater heights in order to become a man fitting of his greatest rival and girlfriend. Having met her was his greatest stroke of fortune.

“If we’re planning on winning, then we’d better go train, right?”

“Sure! I’ve been itching for a battle after watching Shizuku’s.”

“Hah! That’s so like you, Stella. Let’s get to it, then.”

Once Ikki confirmed that they were alone in the hallway, he wrapped his fingers around Stella’s hand. She squeezed his hand tightly in return.

Ever since they had taken the next step at the pool, the couple had become a bit more used to that sort of physical contact. They’d gotten so accustomed to it that whenever they were alone together, their hands would naturally seek each other out.

Ikki and Stella both loved the act of interlocking their fingers, allowing them to feel the other’s presence and heat, but their favorite act was, of course, kissing. The event at the pool was proof that they had gotten much closer to acting like a real couple.

It was a clear step forward, but in truth, Stella felt a smidge dissatisfied with the state of their relationship. Perhaps it wasn’t dissatisfaction, though. Perhaps it was the desire to be even closer. She wanted Ikki to want her as a woman, and the closer the two became, the greater her desire.

That was especially true when they exchanged kisses before sleeping; parting lips was more difficult than anything else in the world. Stella had even moaned in disappointment and desire when their kiss had ended the day prior, startling Ikki.

That was way too embarrassing. Disgusted by the cloying sound that had escaped her lips, she jumped straight into bed and buried herself under the covers. It had taken some time for the flame in her to dissipate. *Am I a nympho or something?*

Just remembering it was painful. Besides, she was the second imperial princess of the Vermillion Empire. Even if he did want her, she wouldn’t be ready to respond to his desires.

At the same time, however, both she and Ikki were adults according to the standards set forth by the International Mage-Knight Federation, as they were above fifteen years of age. They were both real, marriageable adults, and as adults, they had the right to love as they pleased.

If only Ikki wanted me...

If he could look her straight in the eye, put his hands on her shoulders, and say he honestly wanted her, what would Stella do? Would she choose her position as a princess, or would she choose her own feelings?

Not long ago, Stella would have found some excuse to reject him, but she was no longer certain what she would say. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't find a sure answer. If Ikki really, truly wanted her that badly...

I think...

"What's wrong, Stella? Your face is super red."

"Huh?! O-Oh, um, it's nothing! I'm fine!"

"Your face doesn't get that red when nothing's wrong. Did you catch a cold? Here, let me check your temperature."

Ikki brought his forehead to hers with a worried expression, ready to check for a fever.

D-D-Don't come near my face right nooow! Stella screamed internally in response to his kindness.

"R-Really, I'm fine! I swear! Please, don't come any closer!"

Stella successfully drove Ikki back with her response, but she was somewhat appalled with herself. How brazen could she be, imagining such things while walking through the school while it was still light out? It was simply wrong.

That's strictly forbidden until bedtime.

Stella finally calmed herself, ignoring the voice in her head telling her that being in bed didn't make it any better, when something strange appeared from around the corner in front of them. Thinking it may have been a person's shadow, the couple quickly untangled their hands.

Ikki and Stella had to remember their social standing. If the world knew of their relationship, it would be shocked at best, making their lives much more hectic. Until the busyness of school and the Seven Stars cleared up, they decided that hiding their relationship was the best choice.

What appeared was not human, however. It was a pale-white, misshapen rectangle monster.

“Hup... Hah...!”

Upon closer inspection, the monster was actually a giant stack of papers that somebody was carrying with both hands. Neither Ikki nor Stella had any idea who it was, for the mountain of paper was so high that it covered their face, but looking down at their feet, the two could tell that it was a female student.

“Wow, that’s unsafe.”

“Right. We should probably help her,” Ikki decided, and called out to the girl. “Excuse me. Would you like some help carrying all that?”

“Huh?! Eeeaaaaargh!”

The girl was so surprised to suddenly be addressed that she stiffened up, leading to her right foot entangling with her left and her accidentally throwing the entire stack of papers at Ikki.

“Whoa!”

“Jeez, what are you two even doing?”

“Oh no! I-I’m so sorry, I didn’t think anyone else was here!”

“No, it’s my fault for scaring you like that. I’m sorry.”

The three of them got on their knees and began collecting the scattered papers. Once a fair amount of them had been collected, Ikki once again turned his attention to the girl and was greeted by her butt, swaying as she moved.

“Bah!”

“Ah, my glasses. Where are my glasses?”

Her skirt must have ridden up when she fell, but she seemed to not have noticed; she simply muttered to herself as she groped around with her hands on all fours. Every time she moved, her plump rear end moved with her.



“Hey, girl! Your skirt! Your skirt’s pulled up!”

“Huh? Oh nooooo!” Thanks to Stella’s warning, she finally realized that she had pretty much shoved her butt into Ikki’s face and rushed to right her skirt. “I-I’m so sorry you had to see that disgusting sight!”

“You’re fine... Ahaha.”

“Were you looking, Ikki?”

“Would you believe me if I said I wasn’t?”

“Do you think I would?”

“I don’t. Hm?”

As Ikki sighed, something appeared in his peripheral vision. It was a pair of round glasses with very thick lenses.

Oh, is this what she was looking for?

Correctly guessing the reason she was shaking her booty while on her hands and knees, Ikki picked up the glasses and offered them to the girl.

“Hey, isn’t this what you’re looking for?”

“Yes! That’s it! Thank you so much! Let me tell you, I can’t see without my glasses!”

The female student turned around to face Ikki and thanked him as she accepted the glasses. That was when Ikki and Stella finally got a good look at her face.

“Huh?”

“Wha—?!”

They froze in terror.

“Hey, aren’t you...”

The girl, with her chestnut hair styled into two French braids, was the very person who had just overwhelmed Shizuku with her might, the strongest student in all of Hagun Academy.

“Raikiri? Touka Toudou?!”

“Um, yes? Why do you ask?”



“Oh, there you are, Pres! Heya!”

“Hello, Mishima.”

“Congratulations on your victory today, President!”

“Thank you for cheering me on, Sayama.”

“Hi, President Toudou! Thanks again for helping me find my wallet! I’m really sorry it ended up taking all day.”

“Pay it no mind, Itagaki. Besides, we only found it thanks to Uta; I honestly didn’t help much at all. Oh, but please, do take extra care to keep track of it.”

Every few steps she took, Touka was greeted by students, both boys and girls alike. She responded to each of them politely and by name. Ikki and Stella watched the spectacle from a few steps behind, holding the papers that Touka had been carrying before.

“People really love her, huh?”

“I’m just doing what any student council president should do,” Touka said in response to Stella’s honest thoughts, smiling as if she were somewhat embarrassed. “Anyway, thank you both. You didn’t just pick those up for me, you even helped me carry them.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. That was way too much for one person, anyway.”

“Ahaha... I got lazy and wanted to make it in one trip. That’s what I get for skimping, right?” Touka stuck her tongue out in a playful yet bashful manner, an action uncharacteristically cute for the person who had just crushed Shizuku with her fiendish strength. “I’m surprised, though. I’ve seen Stella’s face in the news so many times, but *you’re* the legendary Ikki Kurogane? We’ve met at a rather awkward time.”

That awkwardness was presumably because of what had happened with Shizuku, but Ikki shook his head in response.

“A battle’s a battle. Shizuku gave it all she had and fought a good fight. Likewise, you took up the gauntlet and fought in good faith. To me, that’s all that matters. In fact, I’m grateful that you fought so earnestly. I have no complaints whatsoever.”

That was Ikki’s honest opinion, completely devoid of falsehood.

“I agree with that, but there is one thing that bothers me.” Building off of what Ikki was saying, Stella stared at Touka with a dangerous look in her eyes. There was something she absolutely had to ask. “Touka, from what I’ve seen so far, you’re pretty much blind without your glasses, right? But you weren’t wearing glasses during your fight. Why is that? You were holding back, weren’t you?”

“N-Nuh-uh! That ain’t true!”

“Uh...?”

“What? Oh, u-um, no, that’s not true.” Touka must have been so shaken by Stella’s observation that she spoke in a strange way. She blushed as she rushed to correct herself, but it was far too late. Regardless, she cleared her throat and returned to her usual cadence. “Actually, it’s the exact opposite. I expected Shizuku to be a very difficult foe to deal with, so I couldn’t go into battle with my glasses on—I intentionally made my vision worse to boost the accuracy of my perception. If I didn’t, someone like her would have been tough going.”

“‘Perception’? What does perception have to do with this?”

“When I deprive myself of vision, I become able to sense the impulses in others’ bodies. That’s just one application of my abilities as a user of electricity.

“Humans are essentially living precision instruments. Their actions are controlled purely by impulses sent from the brain, so the ability to sense those impulses is incredibly useful; it means knowing a person’s next actions. Signals sent to the muscles that control their eyes tell where their vision is directed, hormones secreted by the pituitary gland reveal their mental state—all of that and more can be understood from reading them.

“The information you glean from impulses are your foe’s true intentions, and they’re impossible to fake. What is their mental state? What is the next action

they plan to take? Limiting my vision gives me access to even more information than usual, so if I take off my glasses, it's beyond simple to read and understand what my opponent is going to do. That means traps and ambushes don't work on me."

"I see. That's how you dodged Shizuku's ambush, then?"

Touka nodded in affirmation.

"That's one of my Noble Arts: Reverse Sight. I suppose it's not too unlike the Worst One's Perfect Vision, though yours is the result of insight while mine is just a bit of cunning. Anyway, rest assured that I wasn't going easy on her by any means."

"Hmm... I see," Stella replied. "Sorry I doubted you."

"Pay it no mind. Heehee."

"You seem happy."

"I was just thinking about how thoughtful you are toward your friends."

Stella's cheeks turned so red that they were on fire.

"What?! Sh-She and I are *not* friends!"

"Oh? Is that so?"

"I disagree. You two get along really well."

"You too, Ikki?! God, who even cares?!"

She huffed and turned away from Ikki, rushing ahead alone.

Does she know where the student council room is?

She didn't have any idea; she was probably waiting for them just behind that corner. Instead of following her, though, Ikki turned to face Touka.

"By the way, are you sure about that?"

"About what?"

"You just told us everything about your ability. We don't have that many selection battles left, but there's still a chance one of us might be pitted against you."

“It doesn’t matter to me. I won’t lose just because you know how Reverse Sight works.”

“Ngh!”

As if he’d been struck by lightning, a shudder ran from Ikki’s head to his toes. Behind Touka’s mature, tranquil smile, he saw a dangerous twinkle deep in her eye, like light reflecting from the tip of a blade. It was unmistakable proof that she was the Raikiri, with absolute confidence in her own abilities and the thirst for battle with ever-stronger opponents. She was cut from the same cloth as Ikki and Stella, her eyes burning with confidence and ambition.

...Haha.

Looking at her, Ikki thought that they might just become great friends. It made him wish more than ever that he would get the chance to fight her one day.



After five minutes of walking, Ikki and the gang arrived in front of the student council room.

“Whew, finally. It’s such a long walk to the council room.”

“Thank you both. You’re free to come in and enjoy some tea, if you’d like. Toutokubara just brought us some lovely tea leaves yesterday.”

“I’d be glad to. How about you, Stella?”

“Sure. I’m parched.”

“Please, come on in. Hnghyu!”

Touka opened the door to the council room and stepped forward to guide the two inside, when her toe caught on something heavy, causing her to fall forward dramatically. She fell more or less face-first, leaving her rear pointing directly toward Ikki and Stella and her underwear fully exposed. Touka’s skirt was doing a poor job today, indeed.

“Y’know, Ikki, we could put advertisements on her underwear and make a killing.”

“That’s an interesting idea.”

“Oww... What’s it this time?” Once again mixing up her words in surprise at the sudden trap, Touka stood up and looked at the council room again, going pale as she did so. “Wh-What the heeeell?!”

In the council room, everything was scattered about: every book from every shelf, every item from every drawer. Amidst the chaos, Touka’s fellow council members were lined up together.

Secretary Ikazuchi Saijou was taking minutes with his surprisingly neat penmanship, while treasurer Kanata Toutokubara was bringing him tea. In contrast to the two members doing their jobs with due diligence, vice president Uakata Misogi was transfixed on a video game and general affairs manager Renren Tomaru was watching the screen with great interest. She wore only an athletic undershirt and panties, training with a chest expander in her immodest attire.



“Oh? Hey, Pres is back! Hellooo!”

“Ahaha☆ You’re so clumsy, Touka. Falling over again?”

Renren and Uakata greeted Touka when they noticed her, but she merely knitted her eyebrows tightly at the two of them before yelling at the top of her lungs.

“Ughhh! Tomaru! How many times I gotta tell ya to put them dumbbells back after ya use ‘em?! They’re right dangerous! And Uta, put ya manga back on the shelf when yer done havin’ a read of it! Ya *always* leave it lyin’ around! I was gone for a single day; how’d ya manage to make such a pigsty o’ the place?!”

“Hmph! What makes you think *we* messed the place up, Pres? You could be making a false accusation here!”

“Tomaru is the only one who does strength training in the council room, and you two are always the ones leaving manga around!” Touka cried, having collected herself just enough to speak normally again.

“Aw, I just wanted to binge-read some Samurai Z, Dragon Orb, and Dunk Shot. It’s always such a pain to keep going to the shelf, so I took ‘em all out. Then I got all nostalgic for my childhood, so I had to turn the room upside-down looking for my SMES before I could finally dig the thing up. Oh, but don’t worry! Ikazuchi and Kanata did all the work while you were gone.”

“Your smugness over making other people do all the work is making me mad! Honestly, you’re always—”

“President, I apologize for interrupting you while you’re worked up, but you have visitors.”

“Huh?!”

Touka, having forgotten herself in rage upon seeing the sad state of the room, pivoted to face the doorway. There, Ikki and Stella stood just outside the hoarders’ home, watching the pitiful performance before them with forced grins.

“O-Oh, ahaha. Wait here for juuust a sec, okay?” Touka plastered a smile onto her pale face as she pushed the two into the hallway and slammed the door

shut. “Come on and help me clean up! Turn that stupid game off, Uta!”

“Whoa! H-Hang on, Touka! I haven’t saved my game since yesterday! W-Wait, no— Waaahhhhh! My Zola’s Flippers!”

“I keep telling you, limit your gaming time to an hour a day! I swear, I take my eyes off of you for one day! And Tomaru, look at how you’re dressed! There’s a boy right next to you! At least put on a skirt or something!”

“You’re the one who broke the AC, Pres. It’s hot in here!”

“Yep. Whenever you touch any appliance, you go and short it out.”

“I-I am extremely sorry for that, yes, but that doesn’t give you the right to laze around in your underwear! Where’s your discipline?! This isn’t a good look for us, the role models for students all around the school!”

“But you’re always napping in your underwear back in our dorm.”

“Ahaha☆ You’ve always needed someone to keep you on your toes, Touka. Otherwise you start getting lazier and lazier.”

“M-M-My private life ain’t got nothing to do with it! J-Just tidy up, for cryin’ out loud! Anythin’ ya leave sittin’ out, I’m *tossin’* out!”

“Whoa! Okay, okay!”

“Hurry, hurry!”

The council room boomed and shook, as if the members inside were moving homes.

“It’s like Touka is their mother.”

“The student council certainly has its share of troubles.”

Listening to the hustle and bustle from the hallway, Ikki and Stella suddenly had the urge to be nicer to Touka. She had chased them out before they could even put the papers down, but they could hardly blame her. The two of them waited several minutes, until finally, the student council room’s door opened and a haggard Touka poked her head out.

“Haah, haah... S-Sorry for the wait. Please, come in.”

“S-Sure. Thanks.”

Ikki followed Stella into the room, wondering if accepting Touka's invitation to tea had been a mistake, but he was shocked; the inside was nearly spotless, as if they had swapped it out with an entirely different room. The books were all neatly in their shelves, and the floor was so well-polished that he could see his reflection in it. The cleanliness and the subtle, refined antique style of the furniture made the room seem much like a chamber in a Western castle.

It was admirable how they had cleaned up so much in only a few minutes—at least, until Ikki's all-seeing eyes gravitated toward the truth.

Huh. That closet over there looks like it's about to burst. In front of the door, Saijou stood firm, like a guardian statue. *I'll just pretend I didn't see it.*

He chose not to disturb the lid of Pandora's box, letting himself and Stella be guided to a sofa in the center of the room. Once the two had taken their seats around the same table as the members of the student council, Renren grinned affably from the other side of the table.

"Been a while, eh, Kurogane? You've just been winning constantly since you beat me."

"Yeah, I'm really giving it my all out there."

Following up on their exchange, Kanata offered Stella a tender smile and a greeting. Her eyes, peeking out from under the brim of her hat for the first time, were blue.

"It's been some time since we met at that restaurant, hasn't it, Stella?"

"Yes. I didn't think I'd ever end up in this room, though."

"Toutokubara, could you bring these two some tea, please?" Touka requested.

"Of course."

"Hey, Kanata! One more for me!"

"Kanata! I want some cupcakes!"

Utakata and Renren put in orders of their own as well.

"You two will go without dessert today."

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

“That’s just mean, Touka! Why are we even here if we don’t get dessert?!”

“Because you’re members of the student council!”

Touka had raised her voice to a yell. Truly, her life seemed to be a long chain of rapid-fire retorts. Suddenly, while struggling to keep the closet shut—rather, while he stood idly in front of the closet, Saijou’s usually-stern face broke out in delight as he spoke to Touka, who was nearly hyperventilating from overwork.

“I must say, President, you work fast. You’ve already found someone to help us with the matter from before, and the perfect pair, at that. They won’t be lacking in fighting ability, to be sure.”

“Fighting ability”? “Help”?

Ikki and Stella tilted their heads, confused by his ominous words—Touka hadn’t mentioned anything like that.

“Come again?”

When they shot questioning glances at her, they could almost see the question mark floating over her puzzled face. Meanwhile, Saijou was obviously bewildered by her reaction.

“Hm? What, have I got it wrong? We don’t usually get visitors, so I figured that was it.”

“Did you really forget, Touka? Come on, the director herself asked us for this.”

“Kurono asked us... Aaahhhhh!” Touka screamed, her face pale-white.

“My, my. You honestly forgot, didn’t you? I was convinced that was why you had brought these two along.”

“Oh... Well, yes, I did forget. I was so focused on my battle with Shizuku that I forgot.”

“So? What’s all this about?” Stella asked from beside Ikki, interrogating the crestfallen Touka, but the answer was instead provided by Kanata as she poured tea for everyone.

“Recently, Director Shinguuji requested a favor from the student council. Our

school's Seven Stars representatives are usually sent to a training camp in Okutama, but it seems some dubious individual has appeared there."

"That's not good."

"Right. The student council was asked to travel there and confirm things were safe, as all of the teachers are too busy with the selection battles. However, the area around the campground is full of tall mountains and thick forests, so we're simply lacking in numbers."

"I see. So you were looking for help from outside the council." The instructors weren't the only ones whose schedules were full from because of the selection battles. "By the way, what is this 'dubious individual' like? Do we know anything about them?"

"Yes, well..." Kanata hesitated before answering. "It seems to be a giant, standing well over fifteen feet tall."

"What?!"

"A giant?!"

"Yes, a giant. And I don't mean the sports team."

"I know."

"I'm not talking about titans, either, so stay your attacks."

"I said I know. But I'm surprised by what *you* know, Toutokubara."

"H-Hey, are giants really real?!"

Stella took the opportunity to jump into the absurd conversation, leaning forward with excitement. Her scarlet eyes gleamed like an overenthusiastic child's.

"That really got you chomping at the bit, didn't it, Stella?"

"It's giants we're talking about here! They're so mysterious, like cryptids!"

"No way! You like that kind of stuff too, Stella?!" Renren hailed her newfound comrade.

"I love it! In fact, I learned Japanese from Japanese documentaries about Bigfoot!"

That was her introduction to Japanese culture?! Ikki shuddered, but Renren seemed as though she'd found a kindred spirit.

"Ooh! Now you're speakin' my language!"

"Well—"

"Vice President," Kanata said, quickly interrupting Utakata, "I believe that's enough."

"Hey, Ikki! Touka needs us, so we should help her out! I wanna see a giant!"

Stella took Ikki by the shoulders and shook him. He honestly didn't have much interest in giants, but he was benefitting from the new selection battle system that had made things so busy for the student council, so he was more than willing to assist them and happily agreed to the request.

"If you need our help, we'd be glad to join you as fellow students."

"Y-You mean it?!" Their ready assent had given Touka new life. She was no longer holding her head in her hands.

"We can't turn a blind eye to the training camp being ruined, anyway. If you'd be willing to have us—"

"We'd *love* to have you! Thank you so much! You're such a huge help!"

Touka graciously accepted, extending her gratitude with an outstretched hand.

"Don't worry, it's my pleasure!" Stella replied, intercepting her with an enthusiastic handshake.

"Huh? Oh, um, sure. Thank you."

Thus, Ikki and Stella would be joining the student council on their journey to Okutama the following weekend.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

KANATA TOUTOKUBARA

■ PROFILE

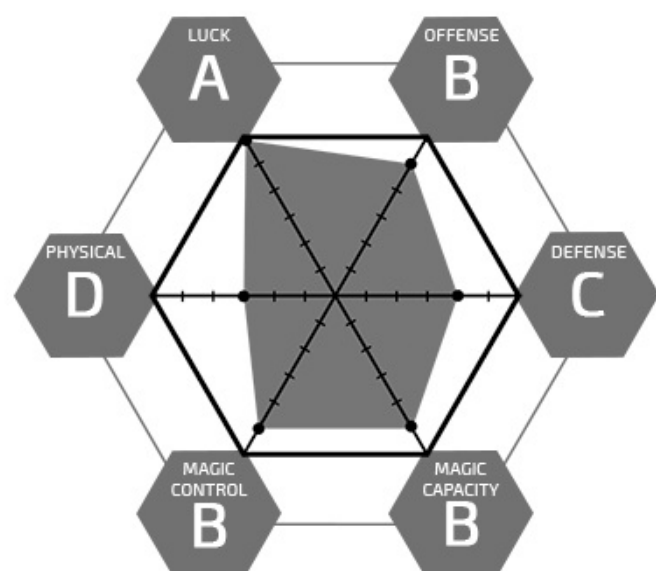
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 3-3

BLAZER RANK: B

NOBLE ART: DIAMOND DUST

NICKNAME: BLUTROTE DAME

SUMMARY: THE STUDENT COUNCIL
TREASURER.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

It's THE Kanata Toutokubara, daughter of one of the most prominent families in Japan! More than that, though, she's an incredibly strong student knight who takes part in real battles alongside the military. Her anti-personnel Noble Art, Diamond Dust, scatters microscopic shards of her sword through the air, chopping enemies to bits from within when inhaled! Eww... She tends to get showered in blood after using it, so she always carries a parasol with her! Ooh, scary.



Chapter 2

Mystery in Okutama

Among the skyscrapers lining the streets of Shinjuku, Tokyo, the Japanese Branch of the International Mage-Knight Federation stood thirty stories tall. In the top-floor office, Itsuki Kurogane, Japan's branch manager, creased his brow while taking a phone call.

"Really? So Shizuku lost?"

His sigh echoed loudly throughout the office, unlit despite it being nighttime.

"Her opponent was Raikiri, so she seemingly had little chance from the start."

"It was Mr. Nangou's favorite disciple?"

"Yes. Shizuku had bad luck there. If only this selection battle silliness hadn't happened, she would have easily been among the selected."

"Silliness" indeed. Itsuki nodded silently in agreement with the man on the phone's assessment. Fighting real battles to select a representative? In his eyes, Kurono Shinguuji's method was the most abominable thing in the world.

"And what of Ikki?"

"The Worst One remains undefeated. Clearly, the students of Hagun are good-for-nothings if a Rank F failure of a knight can make it as far as he has."

"Do you think he'll be selected?"

"Pity though it may be, that failure has already defeated the Crimson Princess and the third-best student, Runner's High. If Hagun raises students this worthless, and if he doesn't run into Raikiri or Blutrote Dame... he may appear on the national stage."

"We can't allow that," Itsuki stated, his voice heavier than lead. He didn't want to even imagine it, but that was what reality was coming to.

“A-Absolutely, sir! I agree!”

“Is there nothing you can do about it?”

“Perhaps we could have the director revoke his certification as a student knight?”

“If that were possible, I’d have done it a long time ago. The right to manage Mage-Knight and student knight certifications falls to the white-beards at the main office; even if our branch could submit a revocation request, it would fail without clear basis to give it cogency. At any rate, we need to take some sort of measure before the Seven Stars Battle Festival.”

For the past year, they had used The Hunter to try to egg him into a fight, but Ikki had steadfastly refused to take the bait. Even when The Hunter pushed him near death, he never so much as evaded the attacks because he knew it could be seen as fighting back. All Itsuki was able to do was force him to repeat a year.

Before he could have Ikki expelled and his student knight certification rescinded, Itsuki first had to have him banned from the Federation. Unfortunately, that was no more than a wild fantasy, as Itsuki didn’t have the authority to do so. To accomplish such a task, he needed some basis to persuade the people who did have that authority.

“I have an ingenious plan to deal with this Ikki Kurogane,” a man’s droll voice echoed through the dark room.

Itsuki turned his eyes languidly toward the entrance, where he found an obese, middle-aged man, his face resembling that of Ebisu, the god of fishermen. He remembered that face—it belonged to Mamoru Akaza, a member of one of the Kurogane branch families.

“Akaza?”

“It’s been a while, family head. Mhmhm!”

“So, what’s this ingenious plan?” Itsuki asked, abruptly hanging up on his phone call. His interested lay solely in Akaza’s claim.

Seeing this, Akaza plastered a dubious smile onto his face and cleared his

throat.

“Ahem! Well, you see, I’ve heard some information through the grapevine. If all goes well, I believe I may be able to assuage your fears.”



The following Sunday, Ikki Kurogane, Stella Vermillion, and the rest of the student council rode in Saijou’s van on their way to Hagun Academy’s campground in Okutama’s mountains. They were off to find out the identity of the legendary giant—to solve the mystery at Okutama—but the site of the campground was large and treacherous, littered with mountains and deep forests.

It was no simple task for people to scour the entire area without equipment, even if they were Blazers. That meant, of course, that the team needed to recharge their batteries by filling their stomachs, so Saijou and Kanata were left to deal with administration duties while the rest of the members were to make curry.

With the division of labor complete, those on curry duty began carrying the campground’s cookware and Touka’s groceries to their campsite. They were given permission to use the campground’s canteen, but since they had come all the way to the mountains, they ended up making camping curry.

“Ahhh!” Stella took a deep breath while placing knives, a cutting board, and other items in the kitchen made from brick. “The air here is so clear, cool, and refreshing.”

“Without any asphalt, the air is much cooler,” Ikki explained.

“There’s way too much concrete all over Japan. It’s so hot and sultry, I can’t take it.”

“Well, most of the country is subtropical, after all.”

Stella’s homeland, the Vermillion Empire, lay in Northern Europe. The temperature was much lower than Japan, with drier air to match. Frankly, Stella’s first experience with the Japanese heat was overpowering, and Ikki had even heard her groaning at night as of late. It was understandable, though; Japanese heat had been known to kill.

“Hey, Stella! Let’s play some badminton!”

One step ahead of Stella, Renren had already finished hauling her cookware and called out to her, racket in hand.

“Sure!” she replied, gladly accepting Renren’s challenge. “Watch out, though, ’cause I’m good.”

“That so?! Well, I’ve got the best footwork you’ll ever see! Bring it on!”

“Heheh♪ I’ll make you regret challenging me!”

“Ah, Stella...” Ikki tried to stop her, but she had already run off. “Jeez, weren’t we just talking about doing the cooking?”

Touka smiled gently at the sighing Ikki as she put down her grocery bags.

“Don’t worry about it. Curry doesn’t need that much manpower, anyway. We can make them clean up after.”

“Fair enough. Oh, by the way, how much were the groceries? I can pay for our share.”

“Hehehe, there’s no need to worry about that. You agreed to help us, so call the meals our treat. In fact, if you don’t let us take care of it, I’ll feel guilty.”

Touka shrugged her shoulders, slightly annoyed, though Ikki would have felt the same way were he in her shoes. Any more humility would just make her feel bad at this point.

“All right, then. Thank you.”

“Touka likes to make her legendary homemade curry roux. It’s sooo good,” Uta-kata raved.

“Mm-hmm. I can’t wait for you to try it.”

“At least let me help a little, though.”

“All right. Kurogane, I’ll entrust you with peeling the potatoes and carrots.”

“Okay.”

“Uta, could you prepare the rice?”

“If you’re making your famous curry, do you want *the usual* rice?”

“Yes, please. I’ve got the California rice here as well. Thank you.”

“Hehe, this is gonna be so good.”

Utakata and Touka seemed to be communicating with just their eyes. Ikki, watching from the side, had no idea what was going on, but he understood the profound depth of the two cooks’ friendship nonetheless.



It had been five years since Ikki ran away from home. In that much time living alone, him having mastered a fair number of domestic skills was to be expected; he performed the job he was given with incredible skill.

First, he peeled the potatoes, soaking them in water in order to keep them from falling apart while they were cooked. While they soaked, he peeled the carrots and cut them into bite-size pieces, taking them to Touka when he was finished. He suddenly stopped on his way over, however, when a sound caused his ears to prick up.

What he was hearing was Touka, who had donned an apron, humming the theme song of a popular children’s anime in which the pastry-headed main character let hungry people eat parts of its head. All the while, she skillfully chopped meat and onions.



Ikki was transfixed on her youthful yet motherly appearance. She had a sort of consummate sense of beauty, almost like a painting.

“Hm? Something wrong?”

“Oh, no. Sorry.”

Startled by Touka noticing him, Ikki quickly brought himself back to reality.

What was that about? It's like I was being drawn in by her.

When he'd watched Raikiri as she took down Shizuku with her overwhelming strength, he hadn't seen anything like that in her. Though fairly curious about it, he pushed the matter into the back of his mind and handed her the ingredients.

“Here are the potatoes and carrots. I also went ahead and soaked the potatoes.”

“Thank you. My, they're so neatly peeled. Having the veggies cut a little bigger is nice too.”

“Since we're eating outside and the sky is so clear, I figured country-style curry might be good.”

“You get a gold star, Kurogane. Guess your aptitude for blades doesn't end with just the sword, huh?”

“Haha, I just lived alone for a long time. So, is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, thank you. I can do the rest with a single pot, so you're free to take a break.”

Two would certainly be a crowd with only one pot, so he accepted her offer and excused himself from the outdoor kitchen.

“Heheheh. What's wrong, bud? Distracted by Touka's big booty?”

Utakata, cooking rice with the camp's cookware, pressed Ikki about why he had been standing there staring at Touka.

“N-No, of course not!” Ikki denied the claim profusely. It did look big, round, and soft, so of course he was a little interested as a man, but that wasn't the reason. “I mean it. It's just... I don't really get it myself, but seeing Toudou

preparing a meal really caught my eye. It's almost like there was something I just had to see."

"Hmm..." Utakata seemed deeply interested in Ikki's answer. "Something you 'had to see', huh? You're definitely not any normal guy if you caught on that quickly."

"What do you mean?"

"You felt like there was something you had to see about the way she was, and you were right. That's kind of like Touka's core—it's the source of her strength."

"It is?"

"Yep. I've known her forever, so I would know."

"Forever"...

Ikki could tell from the way they'd made eye contact earlier that there was a long history between Utakata and Touka, so he decided to mention it outright.

"You two have known each other for that long?"

"Huh? Well, yeah. Both of us came from the same orphanage."

"You did?"

"The Wakaba House is one result of the Toutokubara Foundation's social work. It takes in orphaned children and fosters them. Kanata often visited the Wakaba House while Touka and I were there, so we've known her since back then too. The three of us hung out together so much."

"I had no idea."

Ikki was clueless about how to react given the way Utakata was talking about it like it was nothing. He had assumed they were childhood friends, but not that they had come from the same institution. He couldn't decide whether he should delve deeper into such a delicate subject or leave Utakata alone.

The source of Toudou's strength.

Regardless of which option was better, Utakata's claim attracted his interest. He wanted to know what kind of woman Touka Toudou was, so he boldly continued that line of questioning.

“If you don’t mind, would you tell me more about the ‘source of her strength’?”

Utakata stayed silent for a moment, then posed a question.

“When you hear the word ‘orphanage’, what comes to mind?”

“It’s a place where children live after they’ve lost their relatives, right?”

“In not so many words, sure, but there are a lot of ways kids lose their relatives. Some lose their parents to accidents or fires, some are abandoned... Those are bad, but there’s even worse out there. Some kids are taken away by the government because their parents almost killed them. Stuff like that.”

“Their parents did?!”

“Yeah. There were a lot of kids with tough backgrounds at our orphanage, which made things really bad. Everyone there shared common circumstances, yet they would tease and bully each other a lot. It was so painful. But among all that, Touka was always trying to make all of us happy even though she was an orphan too. In place of the owner, she’d read books to the little kids and make dinner for us. The owner was a really nice person, but wasn’t that great at cooking. Everyone loved it when Touka took over, haha.”

“She seems like a good caretaker.”

“She’s always been that way, sticking her nose in other people’s business. Like with the guy who was almost killed by his parents. He was so violent and uncontrollable, so broken beyond repair, so willing to hurt her over and over again, but she never abandoned him. Thanks to her, he could become human again, feeling real human feelings. To this day, he’s still grateful to her. He still loves her.”

Utakata lowered his eyes as he spoke of the past. At some point, his story had begun to seem autobiographical. Perhaps he was that very child who had nearly died at the hands of his own parents. After a brief pause, he continued:

“So one day, he asked her, ‘Why are you so strong?’ It just got to him so much—they were both orphaned children, so how could she be so loving toward others? She replied, ‘My parents loved me so much. It may have been a short time compared to normal families, but we had our share of smiles and love;

their memory keeps me going even now that I've lost them. Now, I want other children to be able to smile as well. I want everyone to have happy memories that keep them going too, just like I have of my parents. The love that my parents taught me to give is a precious thing.'

"True to her word, Touka still visits the Wakaba House, bringing smiles and courage for all the kids. She had shown us orphans firsthand that we could still grow up to be amazing people, and she continues to do so as the Raikiri, one of the strongest student knights in Japan."

With so much revealed to him, Ikki was finally able to grasp the source of Touka's strength. It was benevolence, giving her the ability to wield unrivaled power for the benefit of others.

Touka Toudou naturally held goodwill toward others. When Ikki had caught a glimpse of a fragment of Touka's good-natured spirit as she cooked for others, it naturally caught his attention. Her naturally good heart, the core of her strength, was vital information that he couldn't afford to overlook.

"Ikki, you're strong. Stronger than I imagined, to be honest. I wouldn't stand a chance against you, and even Kanata would have trouble beating you, but not even you can defeat Touka. Her strength is special; she knows just what it would mean and how many people she would disappoint if she lost. So she won't bend, and she definitely won't break. The two of you simply carry different weights."

"..."

Ikki had no response to that declaration. All he could do was to turn his gaze from Uakata to Touka, still happily cooking away, and to ponder her deeply. He pondered the many people whose hopes and dreams she carried on her delicate little shoulders, along with the strength that allowed her to sustain it all.

I know I'm nothing like that.

Ikki had gotten to where he was believing only in his own self-worth. He'd never relied on or helped anyone, only pushing onward to become his ideal self. The weight that Uakata spoke of didn't guide Ikki's sword. The hopes of others didn't ride on it.

That fact manifested as something like a black, formless haze that coiled around Ikki's heart. *"Can your sword, so free of weight, defeat her?"* it asked him.



The curry they ate for lunch was made with garlic rice instead of white. The dish, Ikki learned, had been concocted by Utakata, Touka, and Kanata through trial and error in their orphanage days, back when they needed to make a cheap meal that everyone would enjoy. The curry roux that Touka brought in plastic containers was mixed with the taste of savory beef tendon, and when combined with the fragrant garlic rice, it made for a delicious meal.

It was the most enjoyable curry Ikki had ever eaten—he devoured it so greedily that he accidentally overate. Stella, however, didn't bother much with it despite usually eating four times as much as the average person. Perhaps she just wasn't a big fan of it.

After waiting a while for their food to digest, Touka split everyone into groups for the coming treks. Walking in the mountains alone was extremely dangerous even for Blazers, so Touka and Utakata were one group, Saijou and Renren another, and Ikki and Stella a third, while Kanata remained at the campsite that served as their home base in case of emergency. The groups then split off and began the hunt. Their objective: finding and securing the giant.

Ikki and Stella made way for the western side of the forested mountains. Unlike normal mountain trails traveled by hikers, the area they were in was a facility for Blazer training. As such, the paths were left unbeaten for training purposes, allowing them to become overgrown with trees and grass. Adding to that, they were walking uphill as the area was at an incline, making it all the more treacherous.

No, if it were merely treacherous, it would pose little challenge for Ikki and Stella, who regularly honed their bodies.

"Ugh, again?" With his left hand, Ikki seized a shadow that had sprung out of the bushes—a pit viper with its fangs bared, marking the third time that had happened.

Even ignoring the difficulty of walking, the ambushes were annoying. Still, he

merely tossed it away with a flick of his wrist and turned his attention to Stella.

“Looks like there are a lot of venomous snakes out here. They won’t kill you, but you should still be careful.”

“...Okay.”

There was little excitement in Stella’s voice. In fact, she was visibly dispirited. If she’d still had her vigor from earlier, she would have taken the lead and pushed her way through the foliage, but instead, she trudged slowly behind Ikki with slumped shoulders and hunched back.

“What’s wrong? Did losing at badminton get you down that much?”

Her earlier match with Renren had ended in defeat. Stella had misjudged the strength of her smash, leading to her own undoing by hitting the birdie out of the court.

“No, I don’t care about that...”

She denied what he thought to be the source of her sulkiness, but her response was clearly noncommittal, almost as if she herself didn’t know why she felt so down.

Seriously, I wonder what’s wrong. Ikki cocked his head in confusion at his girlfriend’s unusual state, unable to grasp just how profound the change was. *Maybe she’s not used to walking these mountain trails.*

“Stay close to me,” he told her. “We don’t want to get separated.”

Ikki held the foliage apart to let Stella through, but that was a mistake. The change in Stella’s mood was not something to be ignored.



I don’t think I like how the sky looks. Rain, maybe?

After about two hours of walking along the rarely-trod path, Ikki stared up through the overgrown trees. He had heard that mountain weather could change at a moment’s notice, but the clear sky’s dazzling blue being so quickly replaced with a dull gray was extreme to say the least. It seemed liable to start raining at any second, and the air was chilly at their increased altitude.

“Hm?”

When Ikki resumed looking forward, he immediately noticed something strange: fallen trees. Not just one or two, either, but dozens.

The area’s topsoil had been turned up, exposing the subsoil beneath. It was as if some giant creature had crawled up out of the earth, uprooting and displacing the trees, deforesting the nearly twenty-foot diameter gouge. Nearby, he could see what seemed like almost half-yard footprints dug into the muddy soil.

“What in the world?!” Instead of a monster, the footprints had a striking resemblance to those of a human. No human could possibly grow to that size, of course, so they couldn’t have been made by one; they must have been the rumored giant’s. “Hey, Stella? Do you think...”

“Haah, haah...”

Ikki called out to Stella to confirm his bizarre finding, but noticed that she was leaning against a tree, almost hyperventilating.

“Stella? Are you tired— Stella?! Why are you sweating so much?!”

He had thought she was leaning on it because she was tired, but that was wrong. When he saw her, he noticed that despite the cool air temperature, her face was bright red and an incredible amount of sweat had collected on her forehead. It was strange no matter how he looked at it.

“I-I’m not sure... It’s getting really hard to move my body. And I’m so dizzy and nauseous... Hey, Ikki, I need to ask you something.”

Stella languidly lifted her reddened face and looked at Ikki. The severity in her eyes showed a spark of resolution; it was plain to see that her question was of utmost importance. What was she going to ask? Ikki swallowed and pressed her to speak.

“What is it?”

So weak she was about to fall to her knees, she asked him:

“Can you get pregnant from kissing?”

“...No, Stella.” Ikki didn’t want to imagine that he was some sort of creature that could impregnate girls through mere lip contact. “I think you’re probably

sick.”

“You mean lovesick...?”

“No, you’ve probably just got a cold. You look like you’ve got a fever.”

“O-Oh, I see. So this is the ‘cold’ everyone talks about.”

“Stella, have you never actually caught a cold?”

“Never. This is why... other kids had to stay home from school, right? I was so jealous of them back then, but now...”

Stella grinned bitterly. It was the first time her own body had ever resisted her so much, so she had only just come to understand how bad her condition was. Japan’s hot, humid climate must have reduced her immunity to disease.

“Anyway, we aren’t going to make much progress like this. Let’s head back.”

“H-Hang on... We just found a clue.”

“You can barely move though, right? The clue can wait.”

“No, I’m fine. See... H-Huh?”

“Stella!”

When she attempted to pull herself away from the tree that supported her, Stella began to sway, nearly collapsing. Fortunately, Ikki moved quickly, supporting her just before she fell. In doing so, he realized that she was abnormally hot—hot enough to feel through her clothes.

This is worse than I thought.

Because Stella didn’t notice that she was sick, she had pushed herself beyond her limit, making her condition even worse. They had to get off the mountain immediately, so Ikki, resolving to do just that, picked up his girlfriend princess-style.

“I’m taking you back, whether you want me to or not.”

“O-Oh...”

Stella looked a little discontent, but she didn’t resist once it was clear that he wouldn’t take no for an answer. Of course, she didn’t have enough energy to

resist anyway, no matter how she felt. Thus, she merely surrendered herself to Ikki, breathing heavily all the while.

I need to get her off this mountain and to a doctor.

Ikki's legs were strong enough to run down a mountain while carrying another person without too much difficulty. It wouldn't take too long to reach the base.

Or so he thought, but it wouldn't be so easy. A few small raindrops began to fall from the lead-colored sky before giving way to a torrential rainfall. It was one of the so-called "guerrilla squalls" that had become increasingly common as a result of Japan's subtropical climate.

"Ugh, this is really bad timing!"

Ikki didn't mind getting wet, but it was a problem for Stella. If she got cold, her immunity would fall even more; she would be lucky to get off with just a cold. If anything happened to exacerbate her cold even further, it could turn into pneumonia, an outcome they had to avoid at all costs to prevent her selection battles from being affected.

That's it! There was a cabin for emergency refuge on the way up here!

Ikki changed course the moment he recalled it. Deciding that they would first sit out the rain, he gave up on getting off the mountain.



There was some distance between them and the cabin, so the pair was soaked when they finally arrived. In order to dry their wet clothes, Ikki started a fire in the cabin's hearth using some firewood that had been kept inside. He then used his student handbook's phone function to call Kanata, who was still waiting at the campsite.

"Stella collapsed?!"

"Yeah. I took her to a nearby cabin to wait for the rain to stop."

"My, my. How is she doing?"

"My guess is it's a bad cold, but I can't say for sure without talking to a doctor."

“Very well. I’ll send help immediately.”

“Thank you. As for the giant, we found footprints that seem to fit the description, along with traces of something huge rising up from the earth. The giant may be underground.”

“Underground...? It’s rather hard to believe that something so large could live underground, but very well. We will take over the investigation of what you’ve found. You two should remain in the cabin and rest until help arrives. It will probably take about two hours. It’s gotten quite cold outside, so don’t forget to dry your wet bodies.”

“Of course. Thanks again.” Ikki hung up the phone and threw the last of their firewood into the hearth. The room had already gotten much warmer. “All right, now we can dry our clothes.”

Ikki removed his soaked clothing until he was wearing only his pants, laying it out in front of the hearth. Then he spoke to Stella, who was leaning against the wall and taking deep, pained breaths.

“You should strip too, Stella. It’s a little embarrassing, I guess, but it’s better than letting your cold get worse.”

“...Okay.”

Stella and Ikki may have been dating, but they were only close enough to be comfortable kissing. She would no doubt be reluctant to bare her skin so early in their relationship, but she didn’t grumble over it. She peeled off her soaked uniform jacket and moved her hands to her skirt, knowing full well that there was no room for her to be stubborn. It was critical that she didn’t allow her condition to worsen even more.

Both Ikki and Stella were fighting to be among a mere six people to move past the selection battles and on to the Seven Stars. If she chose to be stubborn and it made her cold worse, the two of them would never meet in the Seven Stars finals. Stella wasn’t the kind of woman to get her priorities mixed up; she refused to let a little embarrassment get in the way of keeping her promise to Ikki—the most important thing in the world to her. She stood up to take off her skirt.

“Ah.”

“Stella!”

When she did, she collapsed. It was the first time in her life that she had been in such poor condition. Because she had so carelessly worsened her cold, the resulting loss of strength was enough to leave her powerless to even strip.

Ikki, who caught her before she hit the ground, knew that. He could still feel her body temperature through her clothes, and it was even higher than it had been earlier. Her condition was getting worse, and he didn't want to force her to do anything more, so he made a bold proposal.

“Stella, um, why don't you let me do it for you.”

Her ruby eyes bulged when she heard the suggestion. Embarrassing as it was for her to expose herself, for Ikki to do it was entirely out of the question. Even so, Stella nodded ever so slightly and replied quickly.

“Yeah... Please.”

She surrendered herself to Ikki, as she knew that he was forcing down his own embarrassment solely for the sake of her health.

Keep it together, Ikki.

Knowing that Stella was putting aside her worries in accepting his proposal, Ikki again admonished himself fiercely. It was out of the question for him to make light of the situation and embarrass her more; he was the only one who could help her.

Ikki got right to work, moving clinically and promptly to remove Stella's clothes in order to avoid embarrassing her. He couldn't think any sexy thoughts.

Okay.

Once Ikki had sufficiently cautioned himself, he reached his hands toward Stella's clothes.

First were her stockings, which clung to her skin. They would probably have the worst effect on her given that they adhered so tightly to her body, so he unclipped the garter belt connected to them. Then, one at a time, he stuck his finger under her stockings, pulling them down slowly.



Her snow-white legs were revealed as her black stockings peeled off. Well-developed from constant long-term exertion, their length emphasized just how slender and supple they were.

Though Ikki tried to calm himself, he couldn't help but gulp down saliva. That his very hands were what bared her legs only served to make things worse. He was all but forced to notice how alluring they were.

The moment Ikki finally separated the wet stockings from Stella's beautifully-pedicured toenails, he felt a powerful shock run down his body. He had become painfully aware of the naïveté of his plan.

I can't keep doing this without going insane.

Being as robotic as necessary wouldn't have been a problem if it were any other girl, but it was the girl he loved most in the world, and he was stripping off her clothes one article at a time. Very few actions were quite as sensual, and every time more of Stella's skin was exposed, her sweet scent would tickle his nose.

Just removing her stockings had Ikki's heart beating so hard he thought it would tear through his chest. Would he be able to survive taking her shirt off?

But... Ikki took a quick glance at Stella's face, which was red enough that it seemed ready to catch fire. The wetness of her eyes was clearly because of more than just her illness. *I have to be reliable for her right now.*

"Stella, you can take it easy. It'll be okay," Ikki assured her with a smile, hoping to assuage her shyness even just a bit.

"O-Okay..."

It came as no surprise that she remained stiff despite her affirmative response. Given how embarrassed he was, Ikki could only imagine how bad it must have been for her; taking it easy would be impossible. The only thing he could do for her was to get it over with quickly.

With that resolve, he moved his hands to the buttons on her shirt and undid them from top to bottom, taking care not to linger for too long. The shirt had absorbed a lot of rainwater; it clung to Stella's round, bountiful breasts so that

their shape was clearly discernible. He had to make sure he lifted the buttons before undoing them, but he carefully, gently did so in order to avoid touching her as he undid her top.

Once he had undone the bottommost button, Ikki moved his hands to her shirt collar and pulled it open. The wet shirt resisted, but it eventually slipped over Stella's shoulders, removing the veil that concealed her bare skin.

Her throat that moved seductively as she breathed. Her large breasts that were crammed tightly into a lace brassiere. Her porcelain-colored upper body, toned yet not lacking in feminine softness, that quivered slightly with every breath. The entirety of Stella's form, slick and shiny from the rain and sweat, was fully revealed.

That arousing sparkle seemed to short-circuit Ikki's brain. His throat was drier than a desert, and he was assailed with the desire to kiss her soft, sweet-smelling skin. He wanted to run his tongue along it, to occasionally nibble at it, and to wet his throat with her moisture, but he kept his restraint to the last.

What am I thinking? Stella is in pain! He demanded himself to push down the urges rising up from within in an attempt to maintain self-control. If he couldn't do that, his emotions would burst out of him.

"Hey, Ikki...? I want you to... take off my bra."

Stella, now in only her underwear, said something scandalous.

"...Huh?! Uh, wh-what was that?"

"It hurts so much to breathe... I just need you to unhook it."

With every labored breath, her chest heaved greatly. He realized that the bra restraining her chest was probably doing more harm than good, especially considering how large her breasts were.

Should I...?

Ikki was honestly unsure. Stella was in pain, though, which meant saying no wasn't an option. He was the one who had offered to do it, and she was the one who had placed her trust in him.

"O-Oh, um, yeah. Okay. Got it."

Feigning calm, Ikki nodded. Stella's bra was the front closure kind, but it also had straps, so just unhooking it wouldn't be enough to make it fall off completely.

This is fine. I won't see anything. I'll be fine. I'll be juuust fine.

Ikki repeated that mentally as if trying to persuade himself, then extended his index finger to the front hook and undid it. The moment he did, Stella's breasts bounced as they seemingly burst out of the bra, finally freed from their confines.

"Ah...!"

That was tempting enough to deal a fatal blow to the last of Ikki's battered restraint. He had seen it coming, however, and had already taken measures against it. The instant he unhooked the bra, Ikki bit his tongue as hard as he could in a way that ensured that Stella wouldn't notice. The sudden pain erased all of Ikki's impure thoughts and reconnected the thread of restraint that had snapped before.

What am I even fighting against?

Having made it through the predicament, Ikki felt miserable. He believed himself to be pretentious, fretting over a woman's bare body and trying to hide it. If he only had more experience with girls, he could have kept some amount of composure. *Whatever. It's too late to complain about it.*

One way or another, he had successfully carried out his manly duty. He had coolly maintained his self-control, undressing Stella without letting his inward panic show on his face. Surely, he had minimized the awkwardness Stella had to face.

"H-Here, get under this towel. It's cold at this altitude."

Ikki draped a towel he'd found in the cabin over Stella's shoulders. Then, with a faint voice, Stella thanked Ikki for his help.

"Sorry for making you do all this, Ikki."

"It's not your fault you caught a cold. Especially since this is your first summer in Japan."

“Yeah, but... you seem like... you’re in pain.”

“Huh? I do?”

Ikki was flustered. He thought he hadn’t shown any emotion, but Stella wasn’t looking at his face. With an expression that was somewhere between surprise or bewilderment, she was looking much lower, around his waist area.

I have a terrible feeling about this...

“I mean... it’s really, really big right now.”

Following her line of sight, Ikki looked down toward his hips and saw that a certain part of his body had missed the memo about staying calm.

“...Oh.” Ikki was full of vigor in a way that he didn’t want to be. There wasn’t any way for him to fool Stella, and even more embarrassingly, he was that excited while wearing a completely blank expression. He wanted to die. “A-Ahaha... S-So, there’s this thing with men, where, like, even if you’re not thinking those thoughts, part of your body disagrees, and, uh, I’d really appreciate it if you could be lenient with me here.”

Too ashamed to even look at Stella, Ikki averted his eyes and started mumbling excuses. In response, however, a smile spread gently across her sweaty face.

“Uh-uh... Don’t apologize... It is... really embarrassing, yeah, but... like I said at the pool before, I wouldn’t mind if it was with you... Actually, I’m really happy that I get you so excited.”

Ah...

Dizzy beyond belief, Ikki was about ready to fall on his face. Perhaps due to the fever, Stella looked different from usual. Her drooped shoulders and wet eyes seemed so meek and fragile; Ikki couldn’t handle her saying such cute things to him. He wanted to yank her into a hug and kiss her.

“Hey, Ikki?” Stella began, turning her eyes upward to peek at him. “Do you... wanna do it?”

“...Huh?” He didn’t understand the earth-shattering question she had just asked. After a mere moment of pure confusion, he realized just how deadly that

question was and screamed in shock. “Whaaaaaaaaaat?! H-Hey, Stella, you do know what you just said, right?!”

“Yeah... I do.”

“Ngh!”

Ikki was reflected in her ruby eyes, clouded somewhat by the fever yet harboring an undeniable seriousness. She wasn’t just blurting out whatever came to mind because she was sick; Stella was asking that question sincerely, and Ikki knew it.

Gulp.

What was he supposed to say, though? Should he tell the truth? There was only one honest answer to that question: *“Yes, of course.”*

He felt that way in many different situations. Whenever they kissed, held hands, hugged... Ikki had felt that inner urge countless times before. It was natural and unavoidable; he was a boy, and she was a girl. Them wanting one another as members of the opposite sex was the obvious outcome.

Still, putting that into words was a different story. Humanity as a species confirms intent through speech, after all. Consent between two parties becomes a shared decision. If Ikki replied honestly and Stella agreed to it...

It wouldn’t end with just our words after that!

He didn’t have the confidence to bring it to that end. Even if he was able to follow through, when they returned to their dorm and Stella recovered, he would be uncontrollable. That couldn’t be made to pass; the sequence of events was wrong.

“Sorry, I can’t answer that right now,” he said, staring right back into Stella’s serious, ruby eyes. “Stella, I love you, and I wish I could tell the entire world. I’d tell anyone—Shizuku, Alice, strangers... even your parents, because I think this is the purest, most wonderful emotion I’ve ever felt. But... if our relationship turned into that right now, I’d feel guilty facing your parents. I wouldn’t be able to be proud about it.”

Ikki and Stella were both adults; they had little to no reason to be afraid of

what others thought. Even so, Ikki believed that there was a right way to handle such important things. Stella was a treasure to her parents, who had raised her with care. To lay a hand on her without so much as greeting them would be unreasonable.

“I’m sorry,” he said, apologizing again for his failure to answer her question. “My thoughts may be a bit too outdated and stuffy, but this is one point I can’t budge on, even if you think I’m a wuss because of it.”

He wasn’t especially overjoyed by the current situation surrounding their relationship. Ideally, they would be able to make it public immediately, because then he could proudly tell anyone and everyone about his love for her.

Sadly, that wasn’t possible; if they went public, it would be a scandal. It didn’t matter that Stella wanted to be in the relationship, that alone would lower her standing as a public figure. With the impending Seven Stars Battle Festival, they had to avoid that outcome; in Ikki’s opinion, it was all the more important to keep a clear line between them in public.

“I don’t think you’re a wuss.” Stella intertwined her fingers with Ikki’s and a smile appeared on her face, red with fever. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I got all weird with you when you were just thinking about me.”

She returned his apology with a red-hot blush that wasn’t because of the sickness.

“I love you, and I wish I could tell the entire world.” I didn’t know he loved me that much. Stella had never realized just how much Ikki was thinking and doing for her sake. She thought only of the boy in front of her, but he was keeping an eye on those supporting her from behind as well while continuously working to make their relationship even better as they moved forward. It moved Stella profoundly, as it was proof that he cherished their relationship and wanted to handle it with care. *But what am I doing? Ikki is so pure, and then there’s me.*

Just taking off her clothes had gotten her so excited that she forgot her principles—a theme that seemed to be more common than ever before. The thought of how immoral she had acted made Stella even more ashamed of her thoughtlessness.

“Maybe the fever is making me a little crazy. I’ll take a little nap.”

Successfully blaming it on the cold, Stella wrapped herself in the towel and laid down.

“Sure. I’ll watch the fire.”

Ikki didn’t bother to keep up the conversation. After being made to say as much as he did, why would he say any more? He probably thought he’d insulted her, too. Those anxieties tormented Stella, making her want to tear herself apart.

But... I wish he would’ve said yes.

Though she was happy that Ikki was so serious about their relationship, and though her mind was turning into mush from the fever, Stella couldn’t get her mind off Ikki’s vague response.

Reading into the context of the situation, she could easily guess the answer he hadn’t been able to give her. She didn’t just want to imagine it, however; she couldn’t help but want to hear his voice as his lips formed the words. Believing he would say it one day, she began to wonder if rushing it would be a mistake. She couldn’t decide, but she did become painfully aware of one thing:

I must be some kind of pervert.



It wasn’t long after their delicate talk that Stella started snoring from within her towel, but that only lasted about thirty minutes. When she opened her eyes again, her condition had stabilized considerably; the waterfall of sweat had ceased, and it was easier for her to breathe. Her cheeks remained rosy red, but that alone wasn’t enough to develop into pneumonia. Ikki was sitting next to her, relieved to see that she looked better, so she sat up.

If she’s this much better, maybe it’s okay to talk now.

He would have preferred that she continued resting until help arrived, but whether Stella simply hated being still or the embarrassment from their previous talk had resurfaced, she began talking endlessly about pointless things like what was going on at school.

Ikki enjoyed listening to her, of course, but there was a question he wanted to

ask Stella. After confirming that she was energetic enough to carry on conversation, he changed the subject.

“Hey, Stella.”

“Yeah?”

“What are your parents like?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, we’re dating. We’ll want to be open about it someday, yeah? I can’t just go my whole life without at least meeting them, so before I do, I’d like to know what they’re like.”

There was no way Ikki could get around meeting Stella’s parents. In fact, it was an action he felt he had to aim directly for. He wanted to meet them before the Seven Stars was over, and hoped to avoid facing them with a complete lack of information. All he really needed to know was what kind of people they were, so the least he could do was ask.

“Uh, y-yeah, right. That’s what being open about it would mean, huh...? Eugh.” Stella went pale at the thought. It was such an unsubtle refusal that the word “no” might as well have been tattooed across her forehead. “Ikki, uh, just a thought: What if we hide it until right before we get married?”

He couldn’t hide his discomfort with that idea.

“No, I’m pretty sure that’s not going to work. Going completely public can wait that long, sure, but at the very minimum, I have to meet your parents.”

“Don’t worry, Daddy’ll be okay if his little girl tells him, ‘Oopsie, I forgot’.”

“That doesn’t sound like an ‘oopsie’. You might give him a heart attack if you’re not careful.”

Thinking from her father’s perspective, Ikki was sure that getting his daughter’s wedding invitation alongside the morning paper would end poorly. Just spitting his coffee everywhere would be the absolute *best* outcome.

“Aww, but—”

“Do you want to avoid letting me meet your parents that badly?”

“Ugh...” Forced into the heart of the issue, Stella could only groan and nod. “My mom is normal, honest. But my dad is kinda eccentric, and he adores me. If he heard that the two of us were dating...”

“He might be against it?”

“No, I don’t think he would.”

“Then we should be fine—”

“It’s not about whether he approves or not; he’d probably make sure you disappear the moment you set foot in the Vermillion Empire.”

That didn’t sound fine at all.

“Hey, he’s an emperor, right? A real, actual emperor? Let’s not joke around here...”

“It’s not a joke.”

Ikki felt an awful headache coming on, but not because he’d been infected with Stella’s cold. Probably.

If he wanted their love to be proper, meeting her parents was something that absolutely had to be done—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. It was the one thing Ikki couldn’t escape doing. No matter who his foe, his only option was to face them head-on, so Ikki did his best to view Emperor Vermillion in a positive light.

“W-Well, that’s probably just because he loves you, right? He sounds like a nice dad.”

“He just doesn’t know how to cut the cord. When I told him I wanted to study abroad, he cried and begged me not to.”

“I mean, anyone would be against it if you told them you were going abroad to find people stronger than you.”

“True. The only way I got out of there was because Mom pulled some strings and got him thrown in prison.”

“‘Pulled some strings’?! What strings do you have to pull to imprison the emperor?! Stella, you said your mom is normal, but this doesn’t sound normal at all!”

“Ooh, I know! If we just have Mom do that again...”

“No! Absolutely not! I’ll just meet him normally!”

“Huh? You know you’ll die, right?”

“How can you say that like it’s inevitable?!” Ikki recoiled slightly at how seriously she answered him, but if that was what it took to be with Stella, he was ready for it. “I’m glad you’re worried about me, and it seems like it’ll be tough from what you’ve said, but this is the one thing I can’t run away from. I want to meet your father and do what I can to make him accept me. As a man, it’s something I have to do.”

Ikki’s voice was filled with great resolve—resolve that could not be made to waver. Knowing as much, Stella sighed.

“Okay, fine. We can go see him in Vermillion.” Her face broke into a smile as she lay her head on Ikki’s shoulder. “Maybe I wouldn’t mind introducing him to my amazing boyfriend.”

“Thank you, Stella.”

Ikki stroked Stella’s crimson hair as she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, eyes closed blissfully. Her bliss was short-lived, however; her face quickly clouded over, as if she’d suddenly remembered something important.

“Oh, Ikki? One more thing,” she began solemnly. “Do I have to meet your parents too?”

She seemed uncomfortable with the prospect. That was to be expected; she knew Ikki’s relationship with his family—barring Shizuku—was rocky at best.

The question disturbed Ikki’s smile as well. He didn’t know whether it was necessary for her to meet them, or even if he was considered a member of the family anymore. He had disobeyed their orders and ran away from home.

Does my father still consider me his son? Ikki pondered, remembering the look on his father’s face.

“Good question,” he replied after thinking at length. “I think it’s an important thing to do, so how about we go visit the Kuroganes after the Seven Stars?”

If nothing else, Ikki thought of his father as family. He never once thought that

he had been treated like a son, but Itsuki was still the one and only father he had. He hoped that one day they would come to understand each other, so he carried on believing that they were still family.

“Okay, sure,” Stella nodded.

She had some misgivings about Ikki’s suggestion. Kurono, Shizuku, and even Ikki himself had told her so much about the mistreatment he faced from his family.

“You’re worthless, so you should remain worthless.”

Was that something a father could say to his own flesh and blood? To not only abandon your child, but to actively crush his opportunities? Stella, who had been loved by her parents for her entire life, could say with certainty that their relationship was messed up. It simply wasn’t something a parent would do, hence she was apprehensive.

He still thinks of them as family.

Ikki’s assessment of his situation was very naïve, perhaps enough that it would come to hurt him more deeply than ever.

Stella couldn’t just tell him outright that his father no longer thought of him as his child, though. What sort of monster could say something so atrocious? Her only option was to believe that Ikki’s family wouldn’t betray his expectations.

Silence fell between the two of them for a moment, but they both looked up when they noticed that the ground was shaking.

“Hm? What’s happening? An earthquake?” It seemed different than an earthquake. The motion they felt was less of a quaking and more of a swaying. It wasn’t just a one-time thing, either; it was happening in set intervals, almost as if something massive was striking the ground repeatedly. “Do you think this is the giant’s footsteps?”

The sight they’d seen about half an hour earlier came to mind. Gouged-out earth, trees scattered about, and giant footprints. It wouldn’t have been surprising for something with feet that big to create such tremors as it walked.

Ikki wasn't the type to believe in things like the Headless Horseman or the Loch Ness Monster, but he and Stella had found a clear footprint before. He believed it was the most likely explanation, so he stood up.

"I'll take a look," he said. "That's why we came here today, anyway."

"I'm coming too!" Stella cried as she attempted to stand and follow him.

"Nope."

Ikki pushed her forehead away with his pointer finger, using enough force to make her fall on her backside.

"Wh-Why not?! I wanna see the giant too!"

"If it does turn out to be a giant, and if it's violent, I may have to fight it. You ought to stay here and rest since you're sick."

"Aww."

Stella puffed out her cheeks like a spoiled child, but Ikki's stern look forced her to reluctantly obey. He then headed to the entrance of the cabin, leaving her behind, and put his ear against the thin wooden door, where he listened carefully, surveying the situation outside.

Thud. Thud.

The sounds were close. The vibrations at his feet revealed that the epicenter was very close by.

"Come to me, Intetsu."

Weaving together those magic words, Ikki materialized his sword, black as a raven. Then, he took a deep breath to calm himself before hurling himself toward the door, leaping out of the cabin.

When he got outside, he found only an uninhabited forest and harsh rainfall. It was the exact same as it had been when he'd carried Stella over.

What's going on here?

The sounds and vibrations were definitely real, but the massive being that created them was absent. When he thought about it, he realized that the sounds and vibrations had ceased the moment he'd opened the door.

“What on earth happened?” Bewildered, Ikki turned back toward the cabin.
“Huh?”

There, he saw a rock giant, standing over fifteen feet tall, in front of the door. On his way out of the cabin, he had actually walked between its legs.

N-No way!

Ikki stood and stared blankly, stunned at the unbelievable sight, but it was nothing compared to the horror of what happened next. The giant had decided, of all things, to swing its massive arm down onto the roof of the cabin—the very cabin that Stella lay sick within.

“S-Stellaaa!”

It took no time at all for the cabin to be crushed to bits under the monster’s phenomenal strength.



“Rgh...!”

“Ah?! Wh-What?! What’s happening?!” Stella screamed from within Ikki’s arms.

They were a hair’s breadth away from disaster. In the milliseconds before the cabin was destroyed, Ikki had activated Ittou Shura and used its speed to save Stella from being crushed.

“Stella, are you okay?”

“Y-Yeah. But what the heck...?”

“Take a look.” Ikki glanced at the rock giant. “There really is a giant here.”

“Huh...?” Stella followed his line of sight to find the source of all the destruction. “What?! That looks nothing like I imagined it would!”

“Focus on the *actual* problem!”

Stella was right, though. Instead of the large human they’d envisioned, the giant was a humanoid monster constructed of rocks that had been piled together. Its appearance made one question if it even was a living creature.

Whether it was alive or not, one thing was clear: the rock giant definitely had

the intention of harming Ikki and Stella. In fact, it was already following up on its first attack, again swinging a massive arm in their direction.

“Ngh!”

Ikki leaped to the side, avoiding the attack with Stella in tow. Behind him, the earth shattered under the immense force. Not even a Blazer would have been able to withstand an attack like that. The only option they had left was to take down the monster before that became an issue, so Ikki set Stella down and confronted the giant, Intetsu in hand.

“Stay right here, Stella, so you don’t get too wet.”

“Are you sure you want to fight that thing? I’m not sure your sword will work too well.”

“I’m sure. I have something to deal with guys like him.”

Ikki held the blade of his katana in his left hand and drew his right hand, holding Intetsu’s hilt, backward. He was preparing to thrust.

Uncaring—or perhaps like a machine, lacking volition entirely—the giant repeated its attack. Such a dull, unimaginative assault could never work on the Worst One, however. Ikki faced the giant and used his leg strength, amplified to superhuman levels by Ittou Shura, to propel himself toward it. He slipped past the monster’s rocky fist and unleashed his fully-drawn thrust with his right hand, sending a flash of steel tearing through the air.

Arm strength, leg strength, momentum—Ikki’s extraordinary body control allowed him to condense every vector of his power into the tip of his sword, creating his most powerful attack. It was one of the Worst One’s seven secret sword techniques, a charge attack boasting the greatest physical power of them all.

“First Secret Sword: Saigeki!”

Ikki’s body, not having lost any momentum after his initial propulsion, crashed through the center of the rock giant’s chest. The impact of the blow shook the giant’s body; starting from the hole in its chest, the rocks began to tremble as it collapsed. Though they were once combined, the rocks lost their human-like shape and fell into a heap.

“All right!” he cheered, but his celebration was short-lived. “What?!”

The moment he landed and showed the slightest sign of relief, Ikki saw something unbelievable. Like magnets, the fallen rocks began to come together again. The wreckage gathered to mimic the human form once more, but it didn’t regain its earlier size. Instead, there were dozens of rock monsters the size of Ikki.

Amidst the spectacle, he found another abnormality. Between the rocks that were held together like magnets were thread-like traces of magic. He wasn’t facing a mere rock monster; someone was using magic to control the rocks.

“A Noble Art! Stella, our enemy is a Blazer! Keep your eyes peeled!”

“Ikki, behind you!”

Responding to Stella’s cry, Ikki slashed at a rockman that was charging in to punch him. There was a loud *clang!*, and the reverberation of his blade against hard rock shook his arm. All he had accomplished was making a small fissure within the rock.

Is Saigeki is the only attack that’ll work on these things?!

However, Saigeki had a fatal flaw: as a charge attack, he first had to create momentum. The dozens of rockmen rushing in to attack at once, however, left him no opportunity to do so.

“Gnaagh!”

“Ikki!”

Blood flew from Ikki’s head as he took a direct hit from solid rock. There were far too many of the creatures for him to be able to parry every single attack, even when he used Ten’i Muhou.

This isn’t good... Though his hand had been forced, he’d used Ittou Shura too early; he had less than thirty seconds before it came to an end. At the rate he was going, it would run out before he could take them all down. *What do I do?!*

Their foe would not wait for him to think, however. While several rockmen ganged up on Ikki, five others were making their way over to attack Stella, who was still wrapped in the towel.

“Stella!”

Witnessing the horror from a gap between rockmen, Ikki screamed her name, but screaming would do nothing. He couldn’t break through the crowd fast enough. With Stella so enfeebled, being attacked would put her in immense danger—

“Hyaaaah!”

Before he could finish his thought, Stella had, with one swing of Lævateinn, shattered all five of the rockmen who had leaped at her. She hadn’t just dealt with the danger encroaching on her, though; she had blown away the rockmen surrounding Ikki with the force of her attack, smashing and destroying them with ease as she ran to his side.

“Oh? That’s not the sick girl I remember.”

“Yeah, I’m a little surprised too. Guess I don’t know my own strength.” Ikki wondered if she should say something like that about herself, but in his shock, he just nodded. “I can already move more freely now that I’ve rested a bit. I’ll fight with you; I have a much better chance against monsters like these than you do.”

It was true; Stella’s superhuman strength meant she could smash the rocks with brute force rather than having to cut through them. But no matter how strong she was, she was sick. Ikki didn’t want her to overwork herself, but he would make little to no progress fighting alone. If he had to choose—

“Now, now. You shouldn’t push yourself when you’re sick, Stella♪”

An out-of-place, frivolous voice rang through the battlefield. Just as suddenly, the source of that voice appeared before them.

“Vice President Misogi!”



“Hey, kids. I’m here to help!”

“You got here fast,” Ikki replied. “I was told it would take another half hour.”

“Ahaha! Well, you know me—I like to do the impossible. No big deal♪”

Utakata winked at them.

“Grooaaar!”

Behind him, as if haphazardly attacking anything that moved, the monster bellowed and swung its rock fist down at his head.

Thanks to Ten’i Muhou, its stiff fist had only struck a glancing blow on Ikki earlier, but a direct hit would shatter a human’s comparatively soft skull with ease.

“Misogi, behind you!”

Despite Ikki’s warning of the impending danger, Utakata stayed where he was and grinned, not moving even a muscle to evade the attack. The rock fist connected, lopping the head right off Utakata’s shoulders.

“Wha—?!”

“Eek!”

Ikki and Stella watched in horror. With that much power behind the blow, Utakata’s head exploded like a tomato. His tiny body was then thrown into the mud, unmoving.

“Gotcha! Fell for it, didn’t you?” The boy who had died mere seconds before was piggyback-riding the rockman that had killed him, laughing as if nothing had happened. “Aha! ☆ Sorry, I’ve always wanted to say that.”

“...Huh? Wh-Whaaat?!”

Stella was so dumbfounded that she couldn’t help but yell. Ikki was silent, but stupefied nonetheless. He was sure he had just seen Utakata’s head pulverized before him, with blood and bits of bone flying through the air. The grotesque sight was still fresh in his memory; it had definitely happened, but reality told her otherwise. The completely unrealistic result could only have been caused by one thing.

“It’s a Noble Art. One related to interfering with cause and effect, at that.”

“Correct!” Utakata nodded and congratulated Ikki.

Many lineages of Blazer abilities existed; Ikki’s Ittou Shura strengthened his physical abilities, Stella’s Dragon Breath manipulated nature, and Ayase Ayatsuji’s Mark of the Wind manipulated concepts. The rarest form of Blazer

abilities also happened to be the strongest: manipulation of cause and effect.

“My Noble Art, Black Box, allows me to change the outcome of events,” Utakata continued. “As a result, any attack against me fails outright.”

His statement made Ikki recalled a certain event. Back when they had first met at the restaurant, Fifty-Fifty had healed Ikki’s injury with a mere touch. At the time, Ikki had had no idea what power lay within that skill.

I was never injured at all. He overwrote that event entirely. So this is the power known as the strongest of all Noble Art forms?

He shuddered at the thought. Ikki had seen plenty of abilities, but Fifty-Fifty’s was the most aberrant of all. He couldn’t even begin to imagine how he would defeat such a Noble Art.

For the moment, though, he was thankful for Utakata’s irregular power. With him on their side, finding their way out of the ambush would be a cinch. Ikki and Stella both expected as such, but...

“That should make this an easy victory! Help us out, Misogi. We can take these things down all at once!”

“Nope, that’s not happening.”

Utakata quickly shot down Stella’s request.

“Huh? Wh-Why not?!”

“Thing is, my Black Box can only control events that potentially exist. Even a one percent chance is a one hundred percent chance if I will it, but for events that can’t exist, such as someone of my strength winning this, it has no effect. So while one is equal to a hundred, zero is still zero. You two may have been breaking those rocks like it was just another day on the job, but people of ordinary strength like me can’t perform those crazy battle manga feats. Especially not a cute, weak little boy like me!”

“So that’s your ability’s weakness?”

“Yep. If I could do whatever I wanted, you’d see me in the selection battles, but Black Box is limited to events that are possible in the first place. To put it bluntly, if I can’t win on my own, then it can’t do squat.”

For someone as frail as Utakata, the range of possibilities was greatly decreased. Knowing that, Utakata chose not to enter the Seven Stars selection battles.

“Then why are you even here?!”

Stella addressed the elephant in the room. Bringing in someone who couldn’t fight would just make things more difficult.

“To save you, duh.” Utakata shot her a smile that hid a deeper meaning and hopped down from the rockman’s back. “But like I said, fighting isn’t my specialty. I’m just here to navigate her with a one hundred percent success rate—no more, no less. Your turn, Touka.”

He looked up the mountainside, toward a gentle slope. At the edge of the forest, a small area had been cleared out to make room for a cabin.

“Okay! Thank you for guiding me here, Uta.”

The glasses-wearing girl with chestnut hair stood there, her sword shining golden with static electricity.

“Toudou...”

“Things got a little hairy there, but I’m glad you’re both safe.” Touka looked toward Ikki and Stella with damp eyes and sighed with relief. She then tightened her face once more and leaned forward, preparing to charge the monsters that had been set upon the pair. “You two can relax. I’ll take it from here.”

“Wait, Touka!” Stella cried, trying to stop her from being reckless. “Swords don’t work on them! You can’t fight incomprehensible things like them alone! I’ll help—”

“I’m fine,” Touka replied before Stella could finish her sentence. “I know their weakness.”

“What?!”

“Using magic to sic inorganic material on others is one of the favored methods of puppet masters,” Touka explained. “And there’s an ironclad rule when it comes to that fighting style: When controlling multiple dolls at once,

you don't control them all directly; you set up one of them as a hub to control the others. The greatest benefit of this fighting style is that it hides the Blazer, allowing them to fight safely. Finding the source is the greatest measure to defeat them, which is why they try to minimize the amount of threads leading back to them, but if you think about it the other way around, it means destroying the hub will leave them unable to control their dolls."

Such magic couldn't be used in an arena, which offered no hiding spots—in other words, a student knight would be unfamiliar with the style. Even so, despite their status as student knights, Touka and Kanata had been called on to carry out special missions before, giving them real experience with fighting terrorists. They had full knowledge of styles Ikki and Stella had never seen before.

"Found it. Shippuu Jinrai." Touka, using her knowledge and observational skills, instantly picked out the one creature from within the writhing mass of rockmen that connected them all. Activating a Noble Art that boosted her abilities to their limits by stimulating her muscles with electricity, she disappeared in a flash—Or perhaps she didn't disappear, instead leaping directly through enemy lines, aiming straight for the hub.

She moved with lightning speed, faster than the rockmen could even begin to react. While they all stood stock-still like the dolls they were...

"Raikiri!"

...it all ended in a single flash of light. Touka's plasma blade, unleashed at light speed, sliced the hub in two. Every rockman in the area was enveloped in and destroyed by the ensuing blast, powerful enough that one might be convinced that it could blow away even the rain clouds above. When it dissipated, not a single enemy remained standing.



There were no signs of the rockmen reforming. Their invisible foe had given up once his hub was destroyed.

"Wow..." A single word of admiration leaked out of Stella's mouth. "Finding the enemy's weak point with a single glance is amazing, but even more than that, Touka, you've struck an incredible balance between ability and

swordplay.”

“Absolutely,” Ikki agreed. He was sure that the balance Raikiri had found was the reason for her strength.

Touka had a vast array of applications for her ability. Lightning had high attack power, but it wasn’t useful for attacks alone. She could also use it to power herself up physically, bolstering her strength, or cognitively, bolstering her observational skills. That was where her swordplay came in; with extremely honed abilities and swordplay at her disposal, she could combine the two and make them even stronger. She was naturally better than Ikki, who focused only on swordplay, but by his judgment, her power was greater than even Stella’s.

“Honestly, this has been enlightening.”

Stella too saw power in Touka that didn’t exist within herself, and made a rare yet admirable declaration. Still, she frowned, and Ikki knew why. It was because she had realized that the Crimson Princess was no match for the Raikiri.

Rank A and Rank B. Based on their classifications, there was no mistaking that Stella had greater potential. In a year’s time, she would probably leave Raikiri in the dust. However, if the two of them were to fight the way they were, Touka was ten times more likely to emerge victorious. Stella’s frown was because she knew that was the case.

“Stella?” Touka ran over and called to her. “I-I heard you collapsed with a fever. Are you okay?”

Touka’s concern as she dashed toward Stella made her seem like an entirely different person from the one who had just crushed all of those rockmen. She was even paler than Stella, showing just how worried she was.

“Oh, ah, um... I’m much better after taking a short break.”

Stella tried to calm her with a smile, but Touka pressed her forehead against Stella’s and very quickly saw through her lie.

“You’re on fire! You say you’re fine, but you’re clearly not! And look how wet you are! What if you make your cold even worse?!”

“I couldn’t help it. The cabin was destroyed when we got attacked.”

Stella pointed at the cabin's sad remains, to which Touka gave it a worried glance.

"Uta, are there any other emergency refuge cabins nearby?" she asked.

"Nope. But I think I remember there was a cave a bit north of here."

"Then let's take shelter there for now. We don't want Stella out in the rain, and we have to treat Ikki, too," Touka said, lifting Stella into her arms. "We're going, Stella."

"Whoa! H-Hey, you don't have to carry me! It's too weird!"

"I don't care. You're sick, so give up and relax."

Like a mother admonishing her child, Touka shut Stella right up with a gentle yet forceful command. She then carried her in the direction of the cave.

"Touka lost both of her parents to illness," Utakata muttered just loud enough for Ikki to hear. "Ever since then, she's always been such a nag about staying in good shape. When she's like that, you might as well just obey her; she'll give you a spanking if you don't."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience, Vice President."

"She's a prodigy in more ways than one. You do *not* want a spanking from her, what with the way she can snap that wrist."

He was definitely speaking from experience. Just like the events back in the council room implied, they've had a long mother-and-unruly-children relationship.

"So, are you good to walk on your own? You can lean on my shoulder if you need to," Utakata offered, keeping in mind Ikki's exhaustion after using Ittou Shura.

"No, thank you," Ikki replied, shaking his head. "I can at least walk."

"Good. Let's go."

So the party, reunited at last, made their way to the cave that would shelter them from the rain.

“Heheheh. The plan was only to try out my hub and step on their toes a bit, but what an intense bit of retaliation that was. Goodness.” Somewhere in Japan, a gathering of social dropouts took place in a dark room, despite it being midday. There, a tall man sunk deeply into a sofa, sighing with a small grin on his face. “I suppose that’s Raikiri for you. Those puppets stood no chance against her.”

“What an awful smell. Did it burn your arm?” a shadow behind the tall man asked, disdain in his voice.

“To a crisp. Thanks to that, this arm is useless.”

He showed the shadow his left arm. Raikiri’s high-tension electric current had flowed through the magic wires that controlled the rockmen, burning the puppeteer’s arm to the point that flesh was falling from it. The destruction to his body was so severe that he wasn’t likely to see a full recovery even if he were to use a Capsule, but despite that, the tall man didn’t cry out in agony; his singsong tone gave the impression that he was closer to applauding Touka.

“Blame yourself for your own pointless actions. Wait for the eve of the festival, fool.”

“Can’t disagree with that. Heheheh.”

“As a mere student, I know not the opinions of the Organization, but I expect you’re a member of it. They should have taught you that it’s best to refrain from recklessness before a battle.”

“You’re not wrong there, but there’s no fun in waiting around all day. It’s boring, and that’s a bad thing. I can’t *stand* boredom—that’s what makes me the Pierrot. I live to smile, day and night. Whether in good or in evil, to enjoy myself and smile is my sole duty, don’t you know?”

“Difficult as ever to understand, I see.”

“Heheheh, good. A predictable Pierrot would ruin the party, after all.” Speaking with a tone that hardly tried to hide his frivolity, the tall man moved a finger on his right hand. When he did, his scorched left arm fell clean off, as if it had been cut by a well-honed blade. He didn’t bleed, though—presumably because of the intense burns that reached deep into his body. “Oh, did you

want this? I'm afraid it's well-done."

"No. Let that cat eat it, if you'd like."

"Heheheh. Careful, now. If you don't call it Sphinx like she wants, she'll never stop crying."

"You can glue wings onto a cat, but it's still a cat."

The tall man sighed inwardly at the shadow's response. For such a young man, he was quite the stick-in-the-mud.

"Ooh, by the way, that Crimson Princess you love so much was on the battlefield too. She looked worse for wear; perhaps she fell victim to a cold?"

"I don't know, nor do I care."

"My, you're not worried about her? I heard your only reason for being here was to meet her."

"Yes, that's the reason I'm playing along with your foolishness. But if a cold is all it takes for her to be unable to join the tournament, then that only proves that the Crimson Princess was never worthy in the first place."

His words, piercing through the darkness, weren't wrong, but that was part of why the tall man realized how incompatible the two were. He was so unwilling to joke.

"Goodness me, you're so cold. I suppose boys these days have to be boring workaholics to attract girls."

"Keep your jokes to yourself, clown."

Maybe the shadow man was aware of their incompatibility, too; he spat those parting words and left the room. As his figure sank into the darkness, the tall man watched and sighed.

"You're no fun at all. You should learn from your little brother and be more easygoing."



The rain carried on incessantly for more than three hours; the sun was already beginning to set by the time Ikki and his friends could start descending

the mountain. All of the clouds had disappeared the moment it stopped, however, allowing the sunset to dye the forest a rosy red.

Japan's weather is really something these days, everyone thought to themselves as they walked the road back to their base. Along the way, Stella, being carried on Ikki's back, asked a question.

"Hey, Touka? Are you sure it's okay to leave the person who controlled those rockmen alone?"

Once the battle was over, the party had needed to run for the cave to escape the rain, and they had been stuck there since. The identity of the person who had been controlling the puppets remained unknown, seemingly displeasing Stella. Of course, everyone present sympathized; they couldn't shake the feeling that their job had been left undone, with the root cause of the giant still shrouded in mystery.

"Well, I'd be glad to catch them if we could," Touka replied, "but I don't think we can."

"Why not?"

"When I destroyed the hub, I used the bolt from Raikiri to calculate the distance between us and the puppeteer. They were too far away for us to find and capture."

"How far away?"

"I would estimate at least sixty miles."

"Buh-agh! Hack!"

Stella choked when she heard the distance—so far that he might not have even been in the Tokyo metropolitan area. There was no way they would catch him from that far away.

"Ugh. Well, that's a surprise. Can puppet masters really control their puppets from that far away?"

"Normally, that would be impossible. Our special squads usually had Rank B puppet masters in them, but even they could only fully control their dolls at a distance of a third of a mile." That was proof of one thing: Whoever was on the

other end of that magic wire was no normal being. Making mention of that, Touka frowned slightly. “Maybe the fact that we didn’t meet face-to-face was a stroke of luck for me.”

“Sounds like it would be smart for us not to probe too deeply into it.”

Ikki expressed his understanding of her decision. Jumping into battle with an unknown enemy like that would be far too dangerous. Stella, on the other hand, wasn’t one to be happy about letting an enemy get away. She cleared her throat and spoke.

“It’s kind of a letdown for this to end without us knowing the truth behind it, though.”

“I had Toutokubara send a message to the director. If she deems it necessary, she’ll take the next step herself. Since I wounded the enemy pretty heavily, I doubt they’ll come back for more.”

What a crazy thing for Toudou to say so forthright.

A puppet master controlling their puppets from over sixty miles away was outrageous enough, but for Touka to be able to zap them from that same distance meant she was definitely a big deal.

The group continued their chatter as they walked the twilight road down the mountain. The way back was muddy from the rain, but they were Hagun’s most distinguished students; none of them would be so clumsy as to slip. Even Ikki, who was carrying Stella on his back, had slept well enough in the cave that, despite the initial fatigue from Ittou Shura, he was energetic enough to do so with ease. Their march went so well, in fact, that they were able to make it all the way back to the campground at the base of the mountain before the day had ended.

“Oh! Hey there, guys! Good to see you home safe!” Upon their return, they were greeted by Renren and Saijou, who had been waiting outside for them. “I heard you got sick, Stella. Rough going, huh?”

“Sorry to burden everyone so much. This was my first time catching a cold, so I didn’t even know what was happening.”

“Usually it pretty much immobilizes you, but you were as energetic as ever,

Stella, considering how you put a hole in the ground with just the birdie. There might be a point where you're just too strong, y'know?"

"It kinda sounds like you're making fun of me here."

Yeah, this isn't the sick girl I remember.

Ikki couldn't help but wonder why she had been playing badminton like it was tennis. Even so, he had a feeling Stella would be fine in her selection battles despite her cold.

"You've had quite the day, too, haven't you?" Saijou suddenly offered his sympathy to Ikki. "First your partner collapses, and then you're attacked by a giant."

"Hahaha, it's cool. I'm used to having bad luck."

"I heard you were injured. It's nothing major, right?"

"It might swell a bit, but that should be it. I'm fine."

"That so?"

Ikki nodded, but Saijou pulled a small vial out of his pocket and handed it over.

"What's this?"

"I come from a family of doctors; it's essentially a secret salve. It works well on bruises, so you should try it out."

"Oh, really? Thank you. I'll use it later."

Ikki smiled and thanked Saijou for his kindness.

"Gaaay!" Utakata teased from behind them.

"Is this why you didn't come at me even when I was wearing nothing but my underwear in the council room?!" Renren exclaimed, joining in on the fun.

"Wh-Wh-What kind of foolishness are you two going on about?!" Touka shouted. "They're just friends! I think!"

"Why do you sound so unsure about it, Touka?" Stella asked.

The conversation Ikki heard made his head ache even more than the wound

did.

“Sorry about that bunch. They’re always that annoying, so don’t worry about them.”

“Hahaha.”

Saijou truly has admirable mental fortitude. He was a man who had seen a lot.

“Phew,” Utakata sighed. “Anyway, I’m so tired from walking all day. Hungry, too. Hey, Touka! We should have a barbecue before we all go home!”

“Oh, good idea! I couldn’t eat much for lunch, so I’m ready to chow down on some meat.”

“Me too!”

Stella and Renren agreed with Utakata’s suggestion, but Touka shook her head.

“No. Stella is sick, so we need to take her to a doctor.”

“Whaaat?!” the three of them cried in unison.

“Nuh-uh, just look at her!” Renren said, gesturing toward Stella. “She’s in perfect health!”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“See, she says she’s fine! I believe that, as an upperclassman and student council president, you should respect your underclassman’s independence!”

“Complain all you want, but I’m not going to budge on this. You shouldn’t underestimate a cold. Besides, this is an important time for Stella, and we want to take every possible precaution.”

“Aww...”

Ikki could hear Stella’s stomach growling behind him—she really had regained her appetite. Furthermore, her body temperature was nowhere near as high as it was when she was in the cabin with Ikki. She may well have been approaching a complete recovery, though such superhuman healing wasn’t exactly a shock when it came to someone with magical power like Stella’s.

“Toudou, while it is important to get her to a doctor, I’d say it’s just as bad to

ignore her hunger. She'll lack the energy she needs to fight off the cold."

"Ikki...!"

"Ooh, true, true! Good thinking, Kurogane!"

"Hmm, I suppose you're right. Though I'm not sure meat is the best food for someone who's recovering... Oh, fine. Once we get Stella to a doctor and get her some medicine, we can go to an all-you-can-eat barbeque. We have to go now, though, or the hospital will be closed."

"Thanks, Touka!" Renren cheered. "Woo, meat!"

"Misogi, let's go to Kokoen!" Stella suggested.

"Aw, yeah!" he replied. "I'll make reservations right now!"

"No, stop!" Touka shouted. "I said all-you-can-eat!"

The student council really does get lively when they're all together. That was when Ikki noticed they were short a person. "Hey, where's Toutokubara?"

"Kanata went to talk to a visitor or something," Renren explained.

"Oops, I completely forgot to mention that," Saijou said. "Someone came to visit you, Kurogane."

"Me?"

"Yeah, apparently he went looking for you at the school before being told you were here."

Ikki tilted his head. He couldn't think of any acquaintances that wanted to see him so badly they'd follow him all the way to Okutama.

"Saijou, what was his name?"

"Let me think..." Saijou pondered it for a moment. "Oh, yeah. He called himself Akaza."

Ikki stiffened up when he heard that name. Immediately after, a man's slimy voice reached his ears.

"Theeere you are. We finally meet!" He turned his eyes to see Kanata Toutokubara and the man she had been speaking with. "It's been a while, Ikki.

Mhmhm!”

An ugly, obese, middle-aged man in a red suit smiled at him. Ikki knew that man; he had seen him too many times back home.

“Ikki, who is this guy?”

Stella must have felt his back tense up, as she asked that question cautiously.

“This is Mamoru Akaza. He’s the head of one of the Kurogane branch families,” Ikki replied as he set her down.

Stella could tell from just that information what the man was like. She glared at him threateningly, like a cat with its hackles raised.

“Um, is something wrong?” Kanata asked, clearly confused by the sudden aura of danger.

“Mhmhm, there’s no need to look at me like that. I don’t like this either, see? Imagine how I felt coming all the way to Okutama for a good-for-nothing like you.”

Undaunted by the pair’s clear distaste for him, Akaza plastered a gracious smile on his face and spat venom at Ikki. The visitor’s open contempt made even the student council abundantly aware that he was Ikki’s enemy.

“What’s with you?! Don’t you see you’re being rude?!”

Touka couldn’t bear to stand and watch what was happening. She too glared at the rude visitor.

“Well, if it isn’t the legendary Raikiri. Good day to you. Or I suppose it’s ‘good evening’ by now, isn’t it? I heard you risked life and limb to save Ikki. My sincerest apologies for him; he had one job, and he couldn’t even accomplish that. As a representative of the family, I will apologize wholeheartedly. Here goes...”

“N-Nobody wants you to do that—”

“I am sooo very sorry.”

Akaza was talking to Touka, but he clearly wasn’t listening to her. He just kept on repeating his efforts to put Ikki down.

Touka was at a loss for words, agape at his brazen hostility. The other council members were similarly shocked. A silence fell among the gathering until, unhesitatingly, Akaza cut right to the chase.

“Well, leaving that aside, how about we get down to brass tacks? I’d rather not waste time with all these mosquitoes around. Mhmhm. I’m here today with a veeery important bit of news for Ikki, from the Ethics Committee at the International Mage-Knight Federation’s Japanese Branch.”

Outwardly, he smiled, but through his narrowed eyelids, there was almost no light to be seen. It was clear to anyone that his “important business” was bad news. There was no way to get rid of him without asking, though, so Ikki pressed him for answers.

“What could you possibly want to say to me now?”

“Mhmhm. Perhaps showing would be faster than telling. Here, have a look at the evening paper.”

Akaza handed over several newspaper articles. Did they have something to do with Ikki? He looked at the first one, conscious of the pounding of his heart. There, on the front page, was a picture of Ikki and Stella kissing in a forest.



Stella was transfixed on the photograph, wide-eyed.

“Ikki, th-that’s us!”

It was as clear as day. That was the forest clearing where Ikki and the gang trained every morning. The photo, taken while they were kissing, was plastered on the front page of each of the newspapers. Their secret relationship had been exposed by someone in the school.

“Great picture, right? Look at the quality on your faces there. And this is a picture at nighttime, at that! Cameras these days are crazy, huh? Mhmhm. You don’t know yet since you’ve been here in Okutama, but everyone’s going crazy over it. Putting your grubby hands on a royal guest is unprecedented misconduct, after all.”

“H-Hold it!” Stella snatched the papers away and nearly yelled. “Wh-What’s

the deal with these articles?! It's all bull!"

She pointed at the headlines in her fury. *The Man Who Stole a Princess' Purity, Emperor Vermillion Enraged!, A New Problem in Japan-Vermillion Relations?!* All of the headlines were seemingly trying to exaggerate the importance of their relationship.

Comments from the Kurogane family about Ikki were printed, as well. They claimed that he had always had loose morals, that he was a problem child who had nearly torn the family apart, that he was a fundamentally evil person, and even that he was a philanderer with a chain of debauched relationships under his belt. They were all baseless lies, but the newspapers printed those lies as if they were fact.

"Ikki Kurogane has always been a notoriously terrible person'?!"

Though Stella couldn't keep quiet through her rage, Akaza's self-satisfied smirk never left his face.

"No, honestly, it's all true. That just means you didn't know, Princess. Did you expect him to tell you about what a waste of space he is? We, however, have known this man for quite a long time. It pains me to insult a relative, really, but this man has been a delinquent for as long as we can remember. Assault, theft, blackmail—nothing's too low for him. Look, there's even testimony from a victim here. Mhmhm!"

"It's all made up! Anyone who knows anything about Ikki would know that he'd never do anything like that!"

"Mhmhm. Regardless of your thoughts, Princess, this is how the facts have been published; it's clear what the masses think. Even among the Federation, this information has caused countless people to call into question Ikki's qualifications as a knight. As a result, the Japanese Branch has decided to open an emergency inquiry into this matter. With it, we will take a comprehensive look into things, and should we find that he isn't up to our standards, we will petition to have his name expunged from the register of knights. I am here today to bring Ikki to the venue where we'll be holding the inquiry."

Akaza's attitude made it clear to Stella that a simple scandal wasn't the end—the Kurogane family was using it as a front to ruthlessly attack Ikki with their

hatred and damage his standing as a knight. By taking advantage of the scandal, they planned to go so far as to revoke Ikki's license as a knight and have him exiled. They were doing everything in their power to suppress the so-called failure that dared to disobey the Kurogane family.

"You will come, won't you, Ikki? Mhmhm!" Akaza declared in his slimy voice and put his hands on Ikki's shoulders. "This is a formal summons from the Ethics Committee. You'd be wise not to ignore it. Mhmhm, well, if you do, you'll find yourself in a very disadvantageous position."

In response, Ikki remained silent for a moment.

"Fine, then," he finally answered, giving Akaza a resolute look of defiance as he spoke.

When she looked into his eyes, Stella sensed the great malice and accompanying trials that awaited her boyfriend.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

UTAKATA MISOGI

■PROFILE

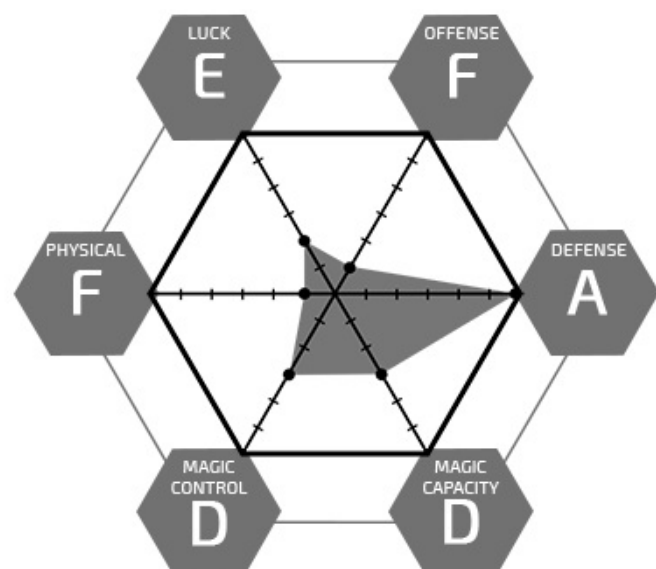
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 3-3

BLAZER RANK: D

NOBLE ART: BLACK BOX

NICKNAME: FIFTY-FIFTY

SUMMARY: THE STUDENT COUNCIL
VICE PRESIDENT.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

The only student knight in all of Hagun with the ability to manipulate cause and effect. His Noble Art, Black Box, is limited only to what's possible through his own strength and actions, but it can even manipulate events that have already been decided. It's almost like a cheat code! How about winning the lottery for me? On second thought, maybe I don't want a power that tells you everything you can't do. It's a little depressing.



Chapter 3

Worst One in Duress

“Greetings, everyone. I sincerely thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to come to this emergency inquiry. We are here today to discuss a certain Ikki Kurogane, a legal adult who has gravely misconducted himself by fostering an illicit sexual relationship with a state guest. Thus, many in this Japanese Branch office have called into question his accountability and sense of ethics.

“Student knights are given various rights at age fifteen that normal children do not have. Thus, it is only natural that we would expect them to have a sense of responsibility befitting those rights. In the spirit of that belief, this Ethics Committee meeting was arranged to provide an opportunity for us to thoroughly investigate whether there are concerns regarding Ikki Kurogane’s status as a knight. I know you are all very busy men, so I thank you for your understanding and cooperation.”

The International Mage-Knight Federation’s Japanese office building. On its tenth underground floor, a committee existed to oversee the ethics of student knights and Mage-Knights, providing guidance and petitioning for bans when the need arose. They could be said to be a kind of military police.

In one room on that floor, the leader of the committee, Akaza, bowed his head to the gathering of near-middle-aged men around him. He also grinned broadly at Ikki, who stood square in front of them.

“Now, everyone,” Akaza continued, “please be seated so that we may begin the inquiry.”

The inquiry was announced, and everyone took their seats. Only Ikki, who was not provided a chair, was left standing. It was a plain, yet spiteful act, demanding that he stand throughout the hours-long interrogation, but at the

very least, Ikki wasn't so feeble as to admit defeat from such a minor discomfort.

The air here is so stagnant.

Ikki surveyed the room, which had almost no light sources to speak of. Around him were long desks arranged in a U-shape, where Akaza and the other men sat. Three in front and one on either side—a total of five people, all wearing red suits to show that they were members of the Ethics Committee.

"There's no need to act so uptight. I'll say it once: all of us here are on your side." Akaza teased Ikki, noticing that he was sizing up the strength of the committee members. "This inquiry is not the place to point fingers. As unprecedented as your misconduct may be, we want to hear your excuse for having a relationship with a state guest. This is a place of enlightenment, open to you due solely to the combined generosity of your father and us. There's not a single one among us who isn't on your side. Right, everyone?"

"That's right. None of us want you banned from the Federation without at least giving you the chance to offer an explanation. You've tried your hardest to make it to where you are now, mere steps away from making it to the Seven Stars Battle Festival. It would be a shame for all that effort to go to waste."

"...Thanks."

The way they could brazenly lie to his face about so many things was almost amazing.

"Now that you understand that we have your best interests at heart, let's start by confirming the basics. Ikki, is it true that you are in a relationship with Stella Vermillion, the second imperial princess of the Vermillion Empire?"

"Yes, that is true."

"Mhmhm, good on you for being honest. When did your relationship begin?"

"It was around the time the Seven Stars Battle Festival selection battles began. Specifically, the night of my first battle."

There wasn't much point in hiding the truth from them, so Ikki answered honestly. Even so, the committee members all looked at him scornfully.

“Oh? It didn’t take you two very long after you met to start dating.”

“Hmph, kids these days. They’re all about being fast and reckless.”

“Yes. Back in my day, we would take things slow and wait for our relationship to develop organically.”

“These kids are like rabbits, I tell you. I think they call them ‘shotgun weddings’?”

“Truly reprehensible.”

They talked as if Ikki and Stella were having premarital sex, but they had done nothing of the sort. In fact, most couples their age would say they were too platonic. They took their relationship very seriously because they were well aware of the delicacy surrounding her status as a princess, making those accusations all the more enraging.

“Excuse me, but I haven’t done a single thing like you all and the newspapers —”

“Ikki, Ikki. I understand you have things you want to say, but you must leave them until you’re given permission to testify. Otherwise, you might give us a bad impression. Mhmhm!”

“...My apologies.” Ikki bowed reluctantly, his testimony blocked by Akaza.

“Hmph. If you want to talk so badly, I’ve got a question for you. Did you never think that it was poor judgment to have an illicit relationship with a princess?” the man to Ikki’s left, with a goatee and an unpleasant look in his eye, asked curtly. “That’s a very dangerous act that could quickly develop into an international incident. I know you’re at an age when you’re always thinking with the wrong head, but do you really lack even the sense to choose a more suitable plaything?”

“My relationship with Stella isn’t ‘play’. We honestly love each other.”

“Hmph. Brat.”

“Mhmhm! I once thought my first love was the one too. Oh, youth is a wonderful thing.”

“If you’ll permit me to say it, Stella and I are legal adults. We have the right to

marry. Don't you think it's completely normal to take our relationship seriously?"

"A trivial objection. You're awfully defiant, aren't you?"

"Come on, now. You'd better rethink that attitude."

"Bad first impression. Mhmhm!"

Akaza wrote something on a piece of paper. As he looked at the men around him who were clearly not willing to listen to his thoughts, Ikki sighed inwardly. They were interrogating him based on an adult's accountability, but simultaneously refusing to acknowledge his rights as an adult; they only treated him as an adult when it was convenient for them.

I figured this would be a farce. The committee's behavior made it abundantly clear that not one of them had any intention of truthfully investigating Ikki's qualifications as a knight. They had already come to the conclusion that he was unfit, and were in the process of searching for information to reinforce that claim, much like during the Inquisitions. *Then again, I've known as much ever since I saw those newspapers.*

From the get-go, everything had clearly been odd. First, the princess of an empire starting a relationship during her time studying abroad. That *would* be scandalous in and of itself, and there *would* be a controversy over it, but the progression from there to questioning Ikki's qualifications as a knight was unnatural.

As Ikki had asserted before, he and Stella weren't children. They were adults, so they had the right to marry. There was a legal basis for their love, in a way. With Ikki's and Stella's feelings for each other made clear, even if the emperor of Vermillion—Stella's father—took issue with it, his natural first course of action would be to speak with her.

No such thing had happened, however. Instead, people entirely unrelated to their relationship were calling it wrong and screaming "misconduct", plastering it all over every single newspaper in order to call Ikki's capacity as a knight into question. It was nothing if not abnormal.

Why would something so abnormal be happening? The reason was simple: a

certain someone must have been mixing their own arbitrary opinions into the uproar.

Roundabout as always, I see.

They weren't being roundabout just for kicks, though. All Mage-Knights, student knights included, had their names in the International Mage-Knight Federation's register. Besides acting as a deterrent against war, the existence of such a supranational organization simplified crossing borders for Mage-Knights, allowing them to help each other in times of duress. In the event a war were to somehow break out, thanks to the power of the Federation, gathering knights to battle as representatives of their nations would be orderly and procedural.

There were many other reasons as well, but they had little bearing on Ikki's situation. What was relevant to his case was that knights with their name in the Federation's register couldn't have their knight certifications suspended or revoked by a single nation's government or branch office. Not even Itsuki Kurogane, head of the Japanese Branch, or Akaza, chairman of the Ethics Committee, held that privilege. As such, they were forced to use roundabout methods, like how they had tried to sic The Hunter on Ikki the year before.

They had hoped to pressure Ikki in private to force him to admit that he had done wrong. If they weren't able to do that, they would just say he had a bad attitude or bad posture, or that he looked at them wrong, or that they didn't like the way he talked, and so on. Nothing was beneath them.

Once they had enough information at their disposal to make Ikki look bad, they would use it as grounds to apply for his name to be struck from the register. That was Akaza's aim, and Ikki knew it, so instead of just repeating his own assertions, the safest thing for him to do was to weather the storm and avoid letting them read into his statements.

"Whether you all have a good or bad impression of me doesn't really matter. I truly love Stella, and Stella truly loves me. I can guarantee you that much. I don't believe we've done anything wrong, and I can't stand idly by while someone else calls us wrong."

Ikki knew his best course of action, yet he didn't stop opposing the committee. He was well aware of just how much Stella loved him back;

whenever they hugged or kissed, he would see her gorgeous smile, so he wouldn't let anyone call their love "misconduct" or "wrong". If someone was going to say it was a mistake, he was going to fight back. That was the entire reason he had come to the interrogation.

I told Stella one thing: I'll proudly tell anyone and everyone that I love her.

He would not retreat, and he would not sit silently. If the men before him had never had any intention of entertaining his claims, then all the better; Ikki didn't need their approval. He would make his claim regardless, because his feelings for Stella were the one thing he would never lie about.



In the three days that had passed since Ikki had been taken away and detained by the Ethics Committee, Stella had been like a volcano primed to erupt. She scowled constantly, and sparks flew from her hair like fireworks.

Many students seemed interested in the scandal and wanted to probe her for information, but even approaching her was so intimidating that they all gave her a wide berth. Even in the packed cafeteria at lunch, nobody sat near Stella.

"You look pretty menacing for someone who just recovered from a cold, Stella."

The tall, lean girl who spoke to Stella so nonchalantly was Nagi Alisuin, someone in no position to worry about such trivialities.

A voice from afar—likely one of her fans—warned, "Lady Nagi, it's too dangerous!", and though Stella wouldn't take out her anger on a friend no matter how mad she was, her attitude and speech were clearly more aggressive.

"No duh. You think I can smile when they're all writing lies about me?" Stella spat. "They", of course, being the newspapers. Their lies involved lambasting Ikki and painting Stella as a weak-minded woman who was fooled by a monster. She boiled with indignation just from remembering it. "I heard it was bad, but Japan's mass media really has reached a new low."

"Nyehehe, that one definitely hit home."

Another girl, wearing an apologetic look beneath her glasses, said as she sat next to Stella.

“Kagami?”

“Mind if I sit with you?”

“Go on. There’s plenty of space, not that I mind.”

“Nyehehe. Thanks.” Kagami Kusakabe moved her lunch tray over to Stella’s table and continued speaking, looking apologetic. “I don’t blame you for being mad, Stella. I mean, yeah, it’s obvious that you dating someone while studying here would turn into a scandal, but the reporters are slimeballs for completely ignoring your judgement in favor of calling your relationship ‘misconduct’. That’s gonna cause an *actual* international incident, but hey, that’s probably why they’re reporting it like that in the first place.”

“Oh? What’s that mean?”

“Well, I’ve got a bit of clout in the world of reporters, so I had my contacts dig up some dirt. As it turns out, the Ethics Committee has been pressuring people like nobody’s business. They publicized the Princess Vermillion Scandal as misconduct, trying to make it out to be something horrible. And just between us, the committee has even been threatening to take away some outlets’ publication rights to entertainment events like the King of Knights.”

“Since the Federation controls the KoK, they’re free to make threats like that, then? I see.”

Newspapers losing their publication rights to the greatest entertainment event in the world would deal an immense blow to their sales, one great enough that said papers would be hard pressed to not fail immediately. They essentially had knives at their throats; their only option was to give in to the coercion.

The facts according to Kagami were proof enough that the Ethics Committee and Itsuki Kurogane were really coming after Ikki’s certification as a knight. Knowing how serious they were, Stella couldn’t help but be taken aback.

“I can’t believe it... Ikki’s just a high school student! Why is his own father, the head of the Federation’s Japanese Branch, going so far to corner him?!” What

was the point in doing so? Wouldn't the widespread denunciation of Ikki also hurt the Kurogane family name by extension? What possible reason could he have had? "This is his son we're talking about. Why—"

"That's just the kind of father he is." The reply came from the opposite side of the table, directly in front of Stella. Her voice was quiet yet pretty, not unlike a bell. "That's what he does. There's not much else to say."

"Shizuku..."

"Honestly, I don't know what he's thinking or why he detests my brother so much. His warped mind is beyond my comprehension. That just makes it all the more normal for him to do such horrible things, though."

Shizuku moved her own tray to the table as well, stating the cold, hard truth as she set her Japanese-style meal down opposite Stella.

"Hey, Shizuku?" Stella found the coming words hard to say, but knew she had to. It had only taken her so long to say because they hadn't seen each other since Shizuku's battle with Raikiri. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you about us."

She knew just how much Shizuku loved her brother, so she braced herself for the coming storm. Shizuku's reaction, however, was surprisingly dismissive.

"I don't care. Besides, I already knew."

"Huh?"

"It was obvious from a glance that your relationship had changed on the night of his first battle. Right, Alice?"

"Haha, well, it *was* rather easy to tell."

"Yep!" Kagami added. "I actually noticed too."

"Ugh..." Stella groaned, strangely ashamed. Was their flirting that brazen? They thought they had evaded detection by keeping anything lovey-dovey confined to their room and the forest.

"Your status means that being in a relationship would definitely lead to an uproar the moment it was announced. I get that you two wanted to avoid that during the busy time that is the Seven Stars and its preparations, and I think you did the best you could, so I don't blame you at all. What matters now is what

we do going forward,” Shizuku said, turning to look at Kagami next to her.

“Kusakabe, based on the way this conversation is going, I assume you know my family circumstances to some extent?”

“Nyehehe! Information is a journalist’s lifeline. Yeah, I do happen to know a little.”

“Then I’ll come right out and ask: Do you think my brother could actually be exiled as a result of this case?”

“Not as things are now,” Kagami responded, not hesitating in the slightest.

“Oh, really?”

“Well, Alice, neither of them actually did anything bad, right? I touched on this before, but there’s a limit to how long a handful of journalists can ignore Stella’s side and call it misconduct. For most people, this story is just, ‘Wow, the princess of Vermillion is dating? What’s he like? Ooh, saucy!’ and that’s it; nothing more. The Ethics Committee is trying to fan the flames by calling it misconduct, but it just isn’t catching on. Without that, their claims have no legitimacy; at this point in time, it’s just a large-scale false accusation. In fact, they probably know this, and that’s why they’re trying to control public perception by using the inquiry to dig up dirt in any way they can. Ikki isn’t stupid enough to take the bait that easily, though, so I find it hard to believe the Japanese Branch will be able to ban him. The Federation as a whole sees bans as the last of their last resorts, after all.”

“What makes it ‘the last of their last resorts’?” Stella asked.

“Whether it’s a student knight or a licensed Mage-Knight, the Federation doesn’t want to ban someone unless they’ve done something truly terrible. To put it in perspective for you, do you remember Kuraudo Kurashiki from Donrou Academy?”

“Yes.”

“Even for someone as notorious as him, the most he’s gotten is a stern warning.”

“That’s... a very light punishment.”

“Is there a reason why?”

Kagami nodded in response to Shizuku’s question.

“It’s because most banned knights turn to crime.”

Once they obtained their licenses, all knights dreamed of making livelihoods as Blazers. The vast majority of those to whom that opportunity was lost would use their Blazer abilities illegally, becoming criminals. Countless statistics supported that claim.

“Of course,” Kagami continued, “these people were already bad enough to be banned, so it’s not that surprising, but it’s safer to keep your mad dog on a leash, isn’t it? So the Federation wants to keep all knights under their supervision, and as a result, just about every country that’s a part of it has legislation to keep their Blazers on the path of knighthood. That said, human rights groups in Japan have kept things from progressing that far here.

“Basically, banning Blazers lets all of the mad dogs loose and creates criminals, which is why the Federation is generally reluctant to resort it, and banning student knights is an especially rare case. The Ethics Committee is trying really hard to make it happen this time, though, so I’m a little worried about what’s happening to Ikki right now.”

If the committee wanted to find fault with Ikki’s attitude or tone of voice in response to their questioning, they wouldn’t be able to take it much further than that. However, if Ikki said that he was thoughtless, that would become the accepted truth, giving them a strong backing in their petition to ban him. It would follow that the committee would use any means necessary to accomplish that.

“ ... ”

Everyone present fell silent at Kagami’s mysterious words. The committee’s inquiry was being carried out underground, far from the light of day and right in Itsuki Kurogane’s lap. In addition, the Ethics Committee itself was staffed entirely by the Kurogane bloodline, as if it were their sanctuary. Everyone around Ikki was allied with the Kurogane family; he would never receive fair treatment there. They weren’t likely to resort to torture the way a real inquisition would, but there were plenty of other ways to press him.

Ikki... The more she thought about it, the more awful things Stella imagined, to the point that she hadn't slept properly for the past three days. Every time she closed her eyes, she was forced to picture what was happening to her beloved deep underground. *This is all because of me.*

If she were just another ordinary girl, Ikki's enemies wouldn't have been able to use her to their advantage. She was a burden on Ikki. She was holding him back during the most important time of his life, when he was meant to secure his place at the Seven Stars. That helpless regret revealed itself bit by bit; it hurt her so, so much.

"Maybe I should break up with Ikki." The words leaked weakly from her lips. "Because... it's all my fault, right? If I were a normal girl, this wouldn't—"

"Stella!"

Alice's scream pierced Stella's eardrums. Her voice sent a shudder down Stella's back, causing her to look up from her bowed position. When she did, she noticed the tip of a sharp icicle shooting toward her face.

She reflexively covered herself in Empress' Dress, crossing her arms in front of herself to guard against the spear of ice, but the attack was too fast and too strong. The impact lifted her off the ground and threw her against the cafeteria wall, causing her to crash through it and land outside.

"Ahhh!"

"Wh-What's going on?!"

The cafeteria erupted into a panic.

In the midst of the uproar, Stella felt her arm, grimacing at the pain that shot through it. One of her bones must have cracked when she was thrown against the wall by the blunt icicle, only its sharp tip having melted amidst the flames that burned hot enough to disintegrate even bullets. There was only one person there who could wield water magic like that.

"Wh-What are you doing, Shizuku?!"

Covering her wounded arm, Stella howled at Shizuku, who stood tall atop a table with Yoishigure in hand.



“You’re going to ask *me* that?”

“Eep!”

The look in Shizuku’s eyes sent another shiver down Stella’s spine, even more unsettling than the last. Her voice was quiet, and her face was as placid as ever, but her eyes harbored a chilling glimmer so full of rage that it numbed Stella’s whole body.

“Are you completely ignorant of why my brother is playing along with this farce? He had the option to ignore the inquiry completely and remain silent, because it’s really just an inquisition dressed up as a serious investigation—a farce, designed to lead to a predetermined result. No matter what he says, they won’t listen. The whole reason he’s telling his side of the story is because he couldn’t stomach how they defiled your relationship with their obscene ideas. That’s how much he cares about you. If you even *think* of betraying my brother because you can’t understand that much, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Shizuku’s icy passion was more than enough to make Stella realize the mistake she’d made.

“...Sorry. It was stupid of me to say that.”

Stella earnestly bowed in apology to Shizuku.

I can’t believe I said something so shameful.

She still didn’t consider their relationship to be a mistake, and Ikki was behind enemy lines, proving that he was still proud of their relationship.

The enemy’s purpose was to cast doubts on Ikki’s sense of responsibility, stripping him of his status as an adult and a knight. Therefore, if Ikki had ever said that dating Stella was thoughtless or a mistake, they would have been sure to publicize it immediately, because it was proof that Ikki was admitting to being an irresponsible fool.

“I love you, and I wish I could tell the entire world.”

He was putting those words into practice even in such an awful situation. That was how strongly his love for Stella burned. But what was she to do? How could she respond to Ikki’s passion?

Something only I can do. Something I have to do.

That was...

“Good Lord. You all sure are comfortable with destroying my school.” A voice, mixed with a sigh, called out to Stella and Shizuku. That hoarse voice came from Kurono Shinguuji, weaving her way through the commotion. “Put yourselves in my shoes. You know I have to fix this, right?”

Grumbling as she stepped outside through the hole Shizuku had put in the wall, she snapped her fingers. In doing so, the debris rose into the air and filled the hole that Stella had flown through. It was like watching a video tape rewinding; in a matter of seconds, the hole had been cleanly refilled.

“That should do it.” Nodding with satisfaction at a job well done, she turned her attention to Stella, who was still sitting. “Vermillion, I need to talk to you about the issue with Kurogane. Could you come with me to my office?”

Stella accompanied Kurono to her place of work.



Kurono walked Stella to her office, which reeked of cigarettes, and had her sit on the visitors' sofa. She then lowered herself into a chair opposite her, with a table between them, and sighed as wrinkles of frustration lined her forehead.

“Well, this has all turned into quite the annoyance.”

Stella imagined that Kurono's visible fatigue was a result of her being dragged into the issue as the one responsible for putting them in the same dorm room. She could hardly sympathize, though, as she still took issue with the coed system.

Oh, yeah...

Figuring she might as well preempt Kurono, Stella asked about something that was bothering her.

“Director, what's going to happen to Ikki's selection battles? Surely he won't be penalized for not being able to fight.”

“On my honor, I won't let that happen. Kurogane's opponents will be sent to the Federation's mock battlefield over at the Japanese Branch office. And of

course, we'll have a teacher from this school present to oversee it. No telling what would happen if we let those idiots judge the fights, after all."

"Can I go cheer him on?"

"No, that won't happen. He's forbidden any meetings until the inquiry ends."

"So he's in complete confinement..."

At the very least, it was reassuring that Kurono promised he wouldn't lose by default; treating his confinement as an absence would be going too far. With one worry assuaged, Stella sighed in relief and pressed Kurono to speak this time.

"So, what did you want me to come here for?"

Kurono started talking business right away.

"Mm, I'd like to know what your parents think about all this."

Stella had to wonder why she of all people would be worried about something like that, but at the same time, she had no reason to hide it. She told Kurono how her parents had reacted when she'd called them after Ikki was abducted.

"My mother said she understood my decision, but as for my father, he's a complete no-go. He's so mad. 'How dare he lay a hand on my daughter without permission?!' was his response."

"Your father really loves you."

"He needs to learn to let me be already. Turns out that he's so pissed he's gonna storm over here soon."

"When?"

"Probably three weeks from now?"

"That's around the time selection battles will end. And that's exactly what our goal is."

"Your goal?"

Stella was confused by that statement; what exactly did Kurono mean by it?

“Once Emperor Vermillion herself comes for a visit,” Kurono explained, “the red-suits of the Ethics Committee will absolutely not refuse him a face-to-face with Kurogane. And once everyone related to this incident—you included—can have a discussion, this will finally come to an end. Their claims of Kurogane’s ‘misconduct’ are pure conjecture, only being entertained by the public because this discussion hasn’t happened yet. If Emperor Vermillion himself accepts Kurogane, they’ll be left without a leg to stand on. That’s when I’ll get my chance to chase them down.”

“Are you going to fight back?”

“Absolutely. They falsely accused *my* student on *my* turf. When I’m done with them, they’ll wish they were dead.”

Scary. The look on Kurono’s face and the words coming out of her mouth had Stella cowering; just being near her was terrifying. Though she may have retired from being a knight, the immense pressure that Kurono—once the third-strongest Mage-Knight in the world—exuded had never faded. *But I guess that’s the point.*

The red-suits of the Ethics Committee claimed that Ikki’s actions were so rash that he could cause an international incident. However, if Stella’s father, the head of the Vermillion Empire, accepted him, then all would be well. The only problem was whether or not he *would* accept Stella’s boyfriend.

“Ugh, I’m not too sure about that. He’s seriously unreasonable when it comes to me.”

That man, when she went on a middle school camping trip in the mountains, had put on a bear suit and watched her from the forest. Everyone had mistaken him for a real bear, and he’d almost ended up dead, though she had considered killing him anyway once she’d realized the bear was her dad. That was just who he was, so Stella didn’t see him being very welcoming toward Ikki.

“It’ll be okay,” Kurono said, smiling gently while showing her rare motherly side to the sullen Stella. “If he could raise a smart, upright girl like you, then I’m sure he’ll come to understand that Kurogane’s a good kid.”

There was no real basis for her logic, but surprisingly, Kurono’s words made Stella’s fear vanish. She was right; he wasn’t a bad father at all. In fact, he loved

his daughter deeply. Coming to that realization, Stella wished only for him to come to like the man she loved.

“That would be really nice.”

“But still, you should help with the Vermillion side of the encounter. Take some advice from a married woman: before you two cut the cake, meeting each other’s parents is one of the biggest team challenges you’ll have to face. Don’t make the man do all the work, because what your parents are paying attention to is how willing *you* are to protect *him*.”

“I-I’ll do what I can.”

“Heheh. Yeah, damn right you will. I figured you’d be more depressed when I found you, but I’m glad you seem to be doing well.”

“I guess I just needed an icy little girl to light a fire under me.”

Rubbing her right arm, Stella smiled a little as determination smoldered in her heart. It wasn’t right for good women to leave everything to the men. The time had come for Stella to fight too.

“I love you, and I wish I could tell the entire world.”

Ikki’s words rung truer than ever. Taking them to heart, Stella steeled her resolve.

I have to keep my promise too.



The tenth underground floor of the International Mage-Knight Federation’s Japanese Branch. In a room there, Ikki remained confined.

“Food’s on the table. Questioning starts at six tomorrow, so get to bed.”

A sallow, red-suited man spat inhospitably as he set an electronic lock on the door and left. The room’s only furnishings were a stained bed and a table and chair that seemed ready to collapse at any moment, but after being made to stand all day during the questioning, Ikki appreciated those meager comforts.

He sighed deeply, as if exhaling all of his exhaustion, and sat in the shabby chair. The inquiry had started at 6:00 a.m. and ended at 11:00 p.m. The Ethics

Committee had chairs, and they rotated members four times a day. They weren't fatigued in the slightest, but their victim was far worse for wear. After a week of that, even Ikki's trained body was beginning to falter, though it wasn't the only reason his fatigue continued to build.

"Man, I really miss rice right about now."

He glanced over at his dinner, disappointed. It was just two small nutrition bars. He checked the nutritional information on the back and saw that together, they did add up to one meal's worth of calories and nutrition, but for a growing teenager and warrior like Ikki, it was far from enough. Having so little for his daily meal left him chronically suffering from hunger pangs.

"And nothing to drink, as usual."

Even worse, his hydration was also restricted. Somehow, the water that was supposed to come with his meal would apparently be "lost" along the way. The room Ikki was shoved into had been cut off from the water supply for weeks as well, so he couldn't even wash his hands. It was yet another of their plain but spiteful acts.

Of course, he didn't receive water during the inquiries either. He was forced to use his shower time and the time spent going between his room and the inquiries to fill up on as much water as he could by using the bathroom. Such a way of living would only keep becoming more and more exhausting.

Surrounded by enemies and forsaken by the world. His was a solitary struggle.

Not that it matters.

He was used to it. He'd always made his way alone, relying on nobody, learning from nobody. It wasn't his first time fighting such a battle.

When he closed his eyes, he could still remember hiding in the hills behind his house, silently swinging his sword over and over. The majority of his life had felt no different; he didn't have to try any harder than usual to endure it. Both solitude and hostility were normal conditions for him, so no matter how much Akaza and his goons tried to force Ikki to say that he was mistaken, they wouldn't be able to crush his hardened spirit.

If they keep this up, I can still take it. If he did that, he would likely meet with

Emperor Vermillion soon enough—Stella’s father wouldn’t just ignore the central figure in a crisis that involved his daughter. In that case, Ikki’s main objective was to keep standing firm in the face of the fussy third parties until Akaza lost his right to intervene. *That’ll be the real moment of truth for me.*

He had to get Stella’s father to accept him; it would be the most important event in his life. The very thought of it made him so nervous that his heartbeat intensified, but he couldn’t run away. Not from something so important.

The moment Ikki Kurogane fell in love with Stella Vermillion, that they would meet became a foregone conclusion. To prepare for the inevitable, Ikki spent all his time thinking how he should make the best first impression. Should he wear a suit to their meeting? And for his hair, perhaps he should... part it to the side? He tried to imagine how that would look.

Whoa. Not into that.

The image of Ikki as a businessman made him chuckle.

More than his appearance, however, the thing that mattered most was communicating his sincerity. Cheap visual tricks wouldn’t work; in fact, they would have the opposite effect. There was no other way than to wholeheartedly look the emperor in the eye and appeal to him as earnestly as possible.

I’ve got the time, so I might as well practice.

While tricks weren’t going to work, it didn’t mean he would go in unprepared. He had to rehearse, so he closed his eyes and focused his mind.

Behind his eyelids, he pictured Stella’s father, Emperor Vermillion. Stella had shown him a picture once, so he knew the emperor’s face. He had the same fire-red hair as Stella and stood nearly six and a half feet tall. His beard connected to his sideburns, bringing to mind a courageous lion’s mane.

Ikki opened his eyes, attempting to bring the vision to life. It was almost as if the man himself was standing before him. Of course, he wasn’t *actually* there, but Ikki’s well-honed ability to concentrate created a shadow of the man.

Once he had materialized the image of the man in his mind, he began to spar with it. It was a basic martial arts technique being put into practice, but for an

expert like Ikki, the shadow was more than just a shadow; it had a gaze, heartbeat, and bodily warmth. It was so realistic that it even had an audible pulse. Even the man who had created it couldn't help but shudder.

The lion-like Emperor Vermillion stood with an intense look, saying nothing and standing perfectly still as his eyes, ruby-red like his daughter's, pierced Ikki. He felt as if his skin would crack under the weight of that gaze. His body broke out in sweat and his throat dried up, but if he couldn't handle a fake, there was no way he would be able to stand firm in front of the real deal.

Ikki inhaled deeply and stared right back at Emperor Vermillion. Then he got down on his knees, pressed his forehead against the floor, and expelled all the air in his lungs with a shout.

"Please let me have your daughter!"

"I will not."

His rejection fell on Ikki like lead, shaking his eardrums. Was he not earnest enough?

...Wait a second. No, no, no, no, no. Stop. Hold up.

No matter how insanely intimidating the shadow was, a fake image of a man was still just a fake image. He shouldn't have been able to respond. To find out whose voice that was, Ikki looked up.

"Why would I give you Shizuku?"

Standing before him, he found his own father, Itsuki Kurogane, looking down at him with his cold, ash-gray eyes.

"D-D-D-D-Daaaaad?!"



Another chair was brought into the room, into which Itsuki sat down looked at Ikki from across the table. They stared at each other for a full five minutes without exchanging a single word.

Th-This is awkward. Ikki felt beads of cold sweat rolling down his back. No surprise there; their reunion had started off on the wrong foot, but to make matters worse, Ikki hadn't seen his father even once since his fifth birthday.

He'd never had the slightest idea what to say or what expression to wear were they to be reunited. *That aside, what in the world could this man want with me at this point? Why would he come all the way here to meet me?*

While Ikki was busy trying to read his father's mind, Itsuki broke the silence.

"Ikki."

"Y-Yes?" Ikki answered, his voice shrill.

More beads of sweat formed. His heart started beating erratically. What could Itsuki possibly have to say?

He's been so distant from me for my whole life. I have no idea—

"Do you have some sort of sexual interest in Shizuku?"

"Bah!"

"Incest is wrong. Ethically, of course, but you should also think of your future children's immunity to disease—"

"H-Hey, hang on! I was just trying to rehearse for when I meet Stella's parents, I swear! I love Shizuku, but not like *that*! She's my *sister*!"

"Really? Good."

That was far too close. Ikki was about to be branded as a very dangerous person. If he had waited any longer, he would've been lectured hard.

Well, I guess I can't blame him, if that's how he walked in on me.

Thanks to his outburst, though, a bit of the awkwardness went away. Ikki used the opportunity to ask his question first.

"S-So, uh, what are you here for, Dad?"

"My own son is only an elevator away from me. Maybe I decided to come see you on a whim."

"...Oh. All right."

Ikki didn't know if he was serious. Itsuki had always had such a severe look on his face, and his gray eyes showed no emotion whatsoever. Even if Ikki didn't know his father's true thoughts, he definitely felt his heart screaming,

accompanied by a strange twinge spreading through his cheeks.

What is this feeling? Am I... happy?

He was having trouble analyzing the emotions he was feeling at their ten-year reunion.

“You seem to be doing quite well,” Itsuki said without an ounce of visible tension in his expression.

“H-How so?”

“I mean your results in Hagun’s new selection battle system. I hear you’re at an undefeated sixteen wins.”

“Oh, well, uh... After my battle today, that actually makes seventeen.”

“And you’ve been up against more than just some weaklings. That’s quite the accomplishment.”

“...Huh?”

What was that? Did Ikki’s father compliment him?

What do I do now? I’m actually really happy.

It didn’t take long for Ikki to be sure that he was actually happy to be able to meet his father again, to be able to hear his voice again. Indeed, Ikki Kurogane still loved Itsuki Kurogane. That was why he had answered Stella’s question in the cabin the way he did. After all, Itsuki was his one and only father.

However poorly he was treated, however much he was deprived of simple acceptance, Ikki couldn’t come to hate his parents. Even if his parents could hate him, he could only continue to love. He knew that his father was involved in his investigation and imprisonment, yet despite that, his father was watching him, speaking to him. That alone made him helplessly elated.

Maybe...

He was different from who he used to be, so maybe his father would accept him.

“You’re worthless, so you should remain worthless.”

Maybe he would give Ikki a different answer. With that hope in mind, Ikki

spoke.

“S-So, hey, Dad?”

“What?”

“I’m, um... I-I’m trying really hard. My rank is still F, but I’ve won against some really strong people, and I don’t plan on losing anytime soon. I’m different from the boy who couldn’t do anything. I’ve trained so hard—hard enough that I won’t be a disgrace to the family name anymore. S-So... So, please...” His throat quivering from nervousness, Ikki panted as he breathed in. He mustered up all the courage he could to plead to his father, Itsuki. “If I win the finals at the Seven Stars, will you... Will you accept me?”

In response, Itsuki gazed at his son wordlessly for a moment.

“...I see,” he replied, closing his eyes. “I never quite understood why you left us, but now I see. You were under the impression that I didn’t accept you because you were weak. Correct?”

“Yeah...”

Ikki nodded. That wasn’t the entire reason Ikki had left his home, but there was no doubt that that was part of it.

If that’s the case, though, now that I’m stronger—

“If so, that was a grave misunderstanding. Know that I have always accepted you as my son.”

“Huh?”

Ikki’s eyes opened wide as his body stiffened at the unexpected statement. What did he just say? He accepted Ikki?

“Y-You’re lying!”

“I’m not. If I were, would I have come down to see you?”

“B-But... You never did anything for me. You never taught me how to use my Blazer abilities, you never let me train in martial arts like the branch family kids, you never let me do anything.” Ikki remembered just how stifling his family life had been. Itsuki had excluded Ikki from everything, and when other family

members saw that the head of the family hated him, they would oppress him just the same. The pain, distress, and loneliness still made his heart throb with pain. “If you accepted me, then why didn’t you treat me the same as everyone else?!”

Itsuki’s expression didn’t change in the slightest.

“I had no need to teach you, so I did not. Nothing more. Teaching a student with no talent to learn half-baked sword tricks would be a fruitless endeavor for both teacher and student,” he replied, almost as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. He then stopped and corrected himself. “No, fruitlessness in itself is not a problem. The worst result would have been you as you are now: a half-baked swordsman with half-baked powers, producing half-baked results.”

“Wh-What does that mean?”

Unable to understand what he had just heard, Ikki could only respond with a question. In response, Itsuki closed his eyes again and, speaking matter-of-factly, explained the truth behind his words.

“Ever since the time when Mage-Knights were still called samurai, the Kurogane family has been distinguished among Blazers. We have a responsibility to lead all of the knights in this country. Uniting every knight under one organization is no easy feat, however, as every knight is a superhuman with powers far beyond the ordinary. Because we all have such power in our grasp, we cannot be treated like normal humans.

“To fit everyone into the box that is this organization, we need a sort of pecking order. This pecking order is established in a tangible, public way through the use of a ranking system based on individuals’ abilities. Through it, people become aware of their own roles in society, preserving harmony.

“This is a very important thing—an organization must have every cog, large or small, performing the duty allotted to it for the whole to function properly. There are roles at both the top and bottom of the ladder, and someone at the bottom will never look to someone at the top and think, ‘I’m better than them’, and deviate from their role.

“As you can see, Ikki, you are the greatest evil facing this organization. Someone worthless like you cannot try to gain worth, else others at the bottom

will also become unproductive. They too will become prideful and think that they have worth, thus deviating from their own roles. They bring about decreased productivity and increased wastefulness, harming both themselves and the organization.

“Even if ranking is not a flawless system, its failures are exceptionally rare, therefore we must try to avoid waste wherever possible. That is why I told you: you’re worthless, so you should remain worthless.”

Ikki finally understood the man known as Itsuki Kurogane. The Kurogane family was carrying out the duty it had passed down for generations, and for that purpose, they had imposed hard and fast rules on both themselves and others—the order they lived by. That was the basic principle that guided people like Itsuki, who strove to control others. It was exactly the sort of man Ikki’s father, the Mage-Knight known as Iron Blood, strove to be.

“Wait... a second...” If he truly believed that, it would mean... “Then the reason you told me not to do anything *wasn’t* because I would bring shame to the family?”

“Of course not. Family is unimportant; the role of the Kurogane lineage is to uphold harmony among all the knights of this nation. As such, those who are unable to do anything must fill their roles and do nothing. Ikki, you want me to accept you? Then give up being a knight right now.”

“Gh!”

“Because you’re worthless, you should simply do nothing. That’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted from you.”

That made it clear to Ikki that his father was speaking honestly. Still, it was still an incredibly bitter pill to swallow.

Then what am I to this man? His father didn’t actually hate him, but given the alternative, Ikki would have preferred that he hated him for not having talent. If Itsuki hated him for that, it would have meant he at least expected something of Ikki. Unfortunately, the truth was that Itsuki had no wishes or feelings for Ikki. *That’s just... too much.*

Itsuki’s feelings weren’t even in the dimension of love or hate. To him, Ikki

was nothing but a rock on the side of the road; to love or hate something so trifling would be silly. The knowledge of that fact caused the cold sorrow within Ikki to overflow.

“Ah...!”

“Hm? What? Why are you crying?”

Itsuki knitted his eyebrows in confusion. That reaction was enough to make Ikki realize that somewhere deep in his heart, all he wanted was some sort of connection with his one and only father. He wished and wished for the day when they would come to understand each other, but the way things were, his own father couldn't even understand the reason he wept.

I guess that's it. The two of us are just too far apart.

In that moment, something in Ikki's heart—something vital to him—came crashing down. In that moment, the precision machine known as Ikki Kurogane began to crumble.



After Ikki broke out into tears, he gave no response other than quiet sobs. It got bad enough that Itsuki merely gave up on him and left the room, taking the elevator back up to his top-floor office. There, a red-suited man with a body shaped like a keg waited for him.

“Hello-hello, head of the family. Good day to you. Or should I say good evening by now?”

“Akaza?”

“So? What was he like?”

“As usual, I don't understand him. Though he's not as bad as his brother Ouma, at least.”

“I don't mean his personality. Did he seem to be deteriorating at all?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Mhmhm. I may have played with his food a little bit. He's been eating a drug that destroys both his body and mind simultaneously.”

“One of those truth serums from the military police era? That’s quite the direct method.”

“Just as you know me so well, I also know his stubbornness very well. I don’t expect him to break from questioning alone—that is merely pretext to isolate him. Things are moving along exactly as we calculated; all we have to do is wait for Emperor Vermillion’s visit—”

“You don’t have to explain it. I can imagine, I’m sure.” Itsuki silenced Akaza, who had begun giving a full presentation. “I’m leaving this to your discretion. Do whatever you need to do; I don’t care. However, I will not permit failure. You *will* have Ikki banned.”

“Yes, of course. I understand. Mhmhm. Well, you just watch,” Akaza said, exiting the room.

Alone in his office, Itsuki turned to face the portraits of the Japanese Branch directors that had come before him, the majority of whom were Kuroganes.

Each picture bore the weight of responsibility that they had all inherited. Itsuki himself was one of them, so he was resolved to bring about the greatest good for the greatest majority that he envisioned.

My life of toeing the line, not overstepping my bounds, is the best way of life for the majority of people. There weren’t many people like Ikki, who could shed their powerlessness. Pointless hopes and consigned self-confidence could only lead to loss for both the person in question and the greater organization. Thus, they were less than useless—they were a burden on the organization he managed. *I’ll do whatever it takes to dispose of them. That’s my duty.*

For the sake of the ironclad hierarchy, he would show no mercy, even to his own child. That was the only righteousness for “Iron Blood” Itsuki Kurogane.



Ten days after Ikki was taken away by the Ethics Committee, the Federation’s Japanese Branch held his eighteenth selection battle against a nameless Rank E, accompanied by Yuuri Oreki, who judged the battle. Shizuku had learned of Ms. Oreki’s role beforehand from Kagami, and went with Alice to wait for her at the Federation’s front gate.

Just as the sun was beginning to set, she exited alone. Shizuku and Alice immediately ran over to her and asked for the results of the match.

“Ms. Oreki, what happened with my brother? Did he win?”

“Huh? Um... Yes. He got his eighteenth victory.”

“Is something the matter?” Alice was quick to follow up to her halfhearted answer.

Ms. Oreki looked as if she was considering whether to tell them something, but considering that Shizuku was Ikki’s blood relative, she decided not to hide the truth.

“The thing is, Kurogane doesn’t look too good.”

“What’s wrong with my brother?”

“Well, he was pale, and his breathing was very ragged and pained. But the fact that he won so handily despite that is amazing,” she added.

“Did he catch Stella’s cold?” Alice asked after exchanging a glance with Shizuku.

“It’s not impossible.”

Even if he hadn’t caught her cold, they had heard that Ikki had gotten soaked at Okutama. With the added fatigue of the inquiry, it wouldn’t have been surprising to the pair if he’d caught one of his own.

“No, that’s probably not it.”

Ms. Oreki, who was well-acquainted with illness, realized that Ikki’s condition wasn’t a result of simply being unwell.

“Ms. Oreki?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s nothing. I’m off to see the director now.”

She withdrew her words and left, doubting that she should be saying such a thing to students; it would only serve to make Shizuku worry unnecessarily. Even so, they saw right past it.

“Ms. Oreki wanted to say something there.”

“She does know a lot about sickness. Maybe she noticed something about Ikki’s symptoms.”

“That something being that it isn’t just any old cold?”

“Most likely. They might be doing something to him in there.”

Shizuku felt a chill run down her spine. She knew that nothing was off the table for her father and his goons. To them, the end justified any means.

“Big Brother... Please be safe.”

It was all happening deep underground, far beyond her reach. Impatient and enraged as she may have been, Shizuku could do nothing but pray.



“Hey! Why are you just standing there blankly?!” Ikki opened his eyes wide at the water the Committee threw in his face, accompanied by a hoarse shout.

“Napping during an inquiry?! Is there no end to your irresponsibility?!”

A middle-aged man with thin-rimmed glasses in front of his bangs screamed into Ikki’s ear. His jeers echoed loudly through the tiny room, but even then, the voice seemed so distant to Ikki.

Oh. Guess I fell asleep again.

Two weeks after the interrogation began, Ikki’s fatigue was reaching its peak. Long-term confinement, the same questions and answers repeated dozens of times, his assertions continuing to go unheard. That was more than enough to chip away the sanity from any human.

On top of all that, Ikki had spent the past few days suffering from a sudden high fever and a cough. No matter how he tried to suck in air, pain would rush through him, making it almost impossible for him to breathe; it was as if his lungs were failing. The chronic lack of oxygen led to his consciousness fading in and out.

At best, he had pneumonia, but for all he knew, it may have been developing into something even worse. It was enough to require an immediate hospital visit, but of course, the Ethics Committee wouldn’t allow it.

“Hmph. Things go bad for you, so you feign illness. How childish.” Maybe they

had been waiting for the moment Ikki was at his weakest to corner him. He didn't get a second—let alone a minute—of rest. “Now, let's continue talking about your secret agreement with Director Shinguuji. Under the old director's system, you were deemed unfit and forced to repeat a year, but this secret deal makes light of that, and we believe that there is a clear ethical problem—”

His line of questioning had already been covered over and over. Ikki's response: The old director's decision to make him repeat a year was a result of him being barred from taking classes because of an arbitrary requirement. It was invalid.

The Ethics Committee should have known as much without being told; they were the very ones who had instructed the previous director to do so. However, the red-suits refused to listen. They lobbed questions and assailed him with doubt, yet they ignored his answers while prattling on about him giving a bad impression or being rebellious.

“Ack! Gah! Gahah!”

Ikki had been surprisingly patient despite the vain effort, but when he opened his mouth to argue, he began to cough violently and fell to the floor.

“Damn you, nobody told you to sit down! You've got no grit!”

“Ngh...!”

The man with glasses stomped onto the back of Ikki's head, smashing his face into the floor. The smell of metal filled his nostrils, and drops of blood fell from his nose.

Pitiful.

Caught up in his own helplessness, Ikki could do nothing but smirk. He had a vague idea that his condition was something man-made, probably the result of some sort of drug. Normally, Ikki would have gotten worse bit by bit, but he had fallen apart in one fell swoop.

The killing blow was having met his father, Itsuki. Ikki had always believed that no matter how distant or cold he was, somewhere, there was still a connection between them. That belief had lay somewhere deep in his heart for a very long time, but it proved to be a mistake. It was cut to pieces in the worst

possible way, destroying his mental stability.

An unstable mind could do nothing to save a body beset by disease. There was no stopping his descent. The condition of Ikki's body and mind were crumbling at an alarming rate.

"I think you'll have to be satisfied with that." Suddenly, Akaza stood and commanded the man to step back. He twisted his lips into a vulgar grin as he crouched down next to Ikki. "Mhmhm. You're in some pain, aren't you?"

"..."

"I understand, considering how long you've been in questioning. But understand my point of view: I'm doing my very best to prove that you're a fine, upstanding knight. However, we're just not making any progress this way. So I thought about it for a while, and I found an incredible way to make everyone doubting you eat their words. So, do you want to hear it? You want to hear it, right?"

"What is it...? Ack! Gah!"

Coughs punctuating his question, Ikki asked not because he was interested, but because it was the only thing he could do to move forward.

"Mhmhm." Akaza nodded in satisfaction. "Well, it's nothing special, you see. You should be aware that it is the knight's way to cut his own path through fate. So, why don't we put that into practice?"

"Put that into practice"? How?

"Sooo, we'll settle this dispute between you and your naysayers based on the result of your selection battle tomorrow."

"Based on the result".

That was enough for Ikki to understand what Akaza was saying without him actually saying it.

"You mean a duel against a designated fighter?"

"Yes. Decisions based on duels are absolute to us knights; it's a rule that, while unwritten, is never to be disobeyed. No matter how illogical or ridiculous the decision, a decision made by a duel is bound by tradition. The Federation

operates the same way. If you agree to this duel, and if you can find the strength to come out on top, no one will question you and your qualifications as a knight any longer. Ikki, this could be your miraculous chance to save yourself. It's your only choice, right? Riiight?"

"So if I win tomorrow, you'll let me go?"

"Yes, yes, of course. But as it stands, your opponent for tomorrow is a third-year Rank E. Frankly, defeating someone as weak as him wouldn't contribute much to proving your strength—it won't convince everyone. For this fight, we need to prepare a suitable actor."

"Ack... Who's... your 'actor'?" Ikki asked, having already assumed they intended for him to fight someone strong.

"The Ethics Committee plans to choose the student council president, Touka Toudou."

Akaza's grin broadened more than ever as he named the assassin. An opponent who Ikki would have to fight desperately against, even if he was in perfect health. The top-ranking student in the school and a semifinalist at the previous year's Seven Stars Battle Festival. Seeing as Ikki was so weak he could barely crawl on his hands and knees, she would be too much for him.

He didn't *need* to accept the challenge; at some point, his meeting with Stella's father would be held. If he could hold out until then, everything would reach its end in a place where Akaza and his goons had no influence. In addition, it would be an insult to Touka for her to be roped into such a one-sided fight. Ikki had no reason to accept it.

"Oh, by the way, we've already run this by Emperor Vermillion. Or should I say, a tiny little slip-up on our end has the emperor convinced that you've already agreed to the duel. Dear me, I am so sorry. And let me just say, he is so deeply interested in the fight. I believe he said something like, 'A man who can't overcome this trial will never have my daughter!' If you don't agree to the fight, well, I don't know that he'll be very impressed with you."

So that's it. They were always planning for it to come to this.

Akaza had skillfully blocked Ikki's one point of escape, making him realize that

the inquiry was just an excuse to isolate him from Hagun. Akaza had never thought simple mental torture would be enough to make Ikki admit defeat; it was all meant to coerce Ikki to agree to an unwinnable battle. That was their scheme.

“You’ll stand and fight like a man, I assume?”

Whenever the word “duel” was uttered, logic and justice were thrown out the window—everything rode on the results of the fight. That had been a tradition among knights since the dawn of time. Ikki had done nothing wrong, yet losing his duel with Touka would put him in the wrong. That would mean losing everything.

It was an unfair, awful idea; he had much to lose, and absolutely nothing to gain. He would just be given back the freedom that he was meant to have from the start. It was so, so unfair.

“...Okay. I’ll do it,” Ikki finally answered, his face dripping with bitterness. With all routes of escape cut off, doing so was his only option.

“Heh. Haha! Hehahaha! Wonderful, wonderful! Imagine if you had said no! Mhmhm! This is what boys are all about! Did you hear what he just said, everyone?! The result of our inquiry rides on his performance in tomorrow’s duel! We make dealings with our swords, just like the knights of old! That way, nobody can object to the noble decision that is reached! I declare this inquiry complete!”

The Worst One, in duress, was made to cast himself into a more hopeless battle than ever before. His opponent was Raikiri, whose undefeated close-range prowess may have surpassed even his own.

Against an opponent who was both powerful and in perfect health, Ikki would drag his own worn-down body into a battle that would decide his very future. He remembered what Utakata had said to him:

“The two of you simply carry different weights.”

It was true. Someone like him could never begin to imagine the sheer weight of the hopes and dreams Touka’s delicate shoulders supported. It didn’t stop with the kids from the orphanage, either; she had earned the admiration of

countless people with her previous Seven Stars performance.

Could Ikki really win against someone who had so much to be proud of? Could his sword, guided by naught but a worthless, hollow boy who didn't even have the trust of his father, overcome her?

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

TOUKA TOUDOU

■PROFILE

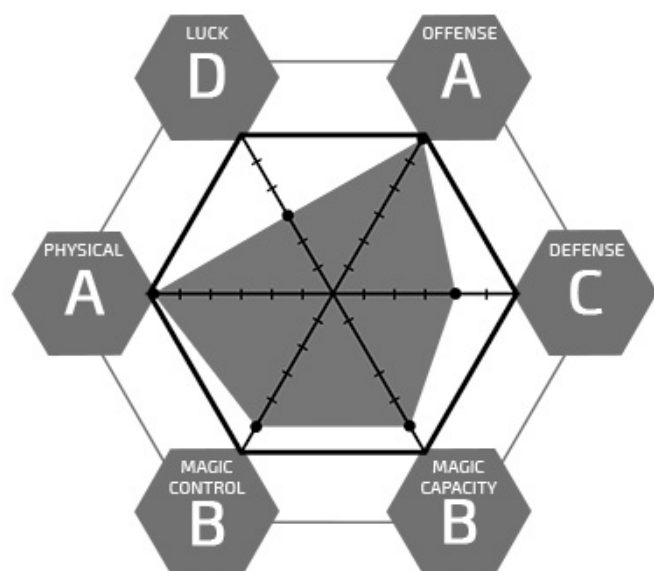
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY,
CLASS 3-3

BLAZER RANK: B

NOBLE ART: RAIKIRI

NICKNAME: RAIKIRI

SUMMARY: THE STUDENT COUNCIL
PRESIDENT.



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Both her personality and abilities are perfect; that's our president! She's more than earned her Rank B status, as shown by her high stats all across the board. Her Noble Art, Raikiri, is such a standout trump card that it's become her own nickname; she's never lost in close-range combat when she's used it. Whether or not you can defeat her all depends on if you can keep her from using Raikiri!



Chapter 4

Cutting the Gordian Knot

“Yeah, I’m okay. I’m doin’ just peachy. Yeah. I think tomorrow’s battle’s the last one for the whole school. Huh? Yer comin’ all the way to Tokyo? Ya made a banner for me, too?! Yer jumpin’ the gun!

“By the way, this year’s Seven Stars’s in Osaka... Yep. Whether I win ’r lose, I think I’ll come ’n visit for a while after the selection battles either way. Yeah. All right, bye. Thanks for the veggies. Tell everyone else I said thanks as well. Take care o’ yerself, Mom. See ya.”

After saying goodbye, Touka turned off her student notebook’s phone function. Her sweat adhered to the liquid-crystal display, which showed the total call time of fifty minutes. She had been on the phone for far too long.

“How’s the matron doing?”

Utakata, sitting on the student council room’s sofa, asked about the person on the other end of the call before taking a bite of a fist-sized tomato. That person was the matron who ran the Wakaba House.

“Pretty well. Almost as healthy as she used to be, actually.”

The matron of the orphanage—the elderly woman Touka called “Mom”—had fallen victim to a heart attack the year before. At the time, Touka would spend whole nights crying, and even the usually easygoing Utakata had been pale with worry. Based on how she sounded on the phone, however, her condition had settled to the point that she actually sounded much better.

“So they already made a banner for you?”

Touka hadn’t even secured the last of her victories, let alone been chosen as a representative yet, but the matron and the orphans had already made a banner to wave at the Seven Stars. It left Touka speechless.

“I swear, they’re always so hasty.”

“That’s just how much they believe in you. You’re their hope—the hero of Wakaba House, Raikiri.”

Utakata opened the box of vegetables the house had sent and handed a photograph over to Touka. The children in the photo were smiling, mud covering their faces as they harvested vegetables. On the back of the image, they had done their best to write words of encouragement using letters they had just learned.

To the children of Wakaba House, Touka was most certainly a hero. Parentless like them, a child of the House like them, she was fighting—and winning—with dignity in front of the entire world.

She was admired by all the orphans. They wanted to be shining beacons of hope, just like her. She continued inspiring them to dream, and to keep chasing their dreams.

Touka was well-aware of the effect she had on them, of course, so she refused to lose. She couldn’t bear to. Their hopes weren’t a source of pressure for her; rather, they gave her greater strength. That was the strongest part of Touka Toudou, the great Raikiri.

I’ll read this later.

Touka held the letter lovingly against her heart before putting it into her bag. Then, she directed her attention to the cardboard box full of vegetables. Tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants—it was full of summer vegetables harvested by the orphans. Much of the harvest was scraggly and misshapen, but it filled her with an indescribable warmth.

“Wow! Look, Uta! This eggplant is so big and juicy! I bet it’d go great in eggplant curry.”

“Yeah. It’s so dark, thick, and juicy, right? Heheh.”

“C-Come on! Quit that creepy old man shtick!”

“Hahaha! There’s so much here that it’ll rot before we get through it all, though. We should take some to the cafeteria tomorrow.”

Utakata's innocent words caused Touka's face to quickly cloud over. She had remembered something unpleasant.

"...Tomorrow, huh?"

Earlier, Touka had been contacted by Director Kurono Shinguuji with an update regarding her opponent for the next day. Specifically, that her new opponent would be the man entangled in worldwide controversy: the Worst One. Touka couldn't help but feel that there was something foul afoot.

When pressed about it, Kurono was open with the truth. The sheer adversity that Ikki was being forced to confront was beyond description. The malice enveloping him had put him into the worst condition possible, and they intended to pit him against a fighter like Touka while in such a condition.

Needless to say, Touka was reluctant at best.

"Are you gonna accept the duel, Touka?"

Utakata knew how she felt. He asked his question in an apprehensive manner, as her face still clouded over with distaste, to which she looked down.

"I don't have any say in the matter. Like the director said, this is nothing more than my final selection battle."

Though Ikki was going into their duel with everything on the line, it was just another selection battle to Touka; a mere change in opponent wouldn't force her to risk anything else on this battle. In addition, extenuating circumstances had forced the school to change selection battle opponents many times, so Touka didn't have much room to protest.

"But you hate that you have to do it, right?"

"Yeah..."

A girl as kind-hearted as her couldn't so easily ignore the lump in her throat, regardless of whether she had been given a choice. That was why she took one single measure.

Knock, knock.

Right on schedule, a visitor knocked on the door of the student council room.

“Who’s here at this time of night?”

“I asked her to come. Come on in!”

“Thank you.”

The girl who opened the door was reminiscent of a porcelain doll. Shizuku Kurogane, the one known as Lorelei, who had fought so desperately against Touka once before.



“Talk about an unexpected visitor,” Utakata said.

“‘Unexpected’ is what I should be saying. Imagine my surprise when the person who ruined my selection battle record called me here this late at night.”

“Haha, true, true. Hey, want a tomato? They’re really sweet.”

“I already brushed my teeth, so no, thank you. I assume you didn’t have me come over here just to offer me tomatoes, so what do you want from me, President?”

Shizuku hurried the subject along. She knew she was being childish, but she couldn’t quell her discomfort when faced with the person who had crushed her dream of going up onto the international stage with her brother. Touka could more or less grasp how she felt, so she got straight to the point of why she called Shizuku.

“Well, the director just spoke with me, and... I decided I should tell you about it, since it affects you as well.”

She told Shizuku about the sudden change in her matchup, and how Ikki was being forced to bet his own future on their battle. With every awful truth that was revealed to her, Shizuku’s expression grew more and more furious.

“Rgh! Damn lowlifes!” Shizuku’s jade eyes shone with rage as she swore at the people responsible. “So, are you going to fight my battered and beaten brother?”

“Even if I’m the student council president, I’m still just a student. I objected as best I could, but I don’t have the power to change my matchup.” Touka was reluctant to fight Ikki, but it wasn’t her decision to make. That was why she had

summoned Shizuku—"I had no choice" wouldn't solve the problem. "That's why I have a request for you, a member of his family."

"Do you, now?"

"Yes. Shizuku, could you please ask your brother to withdraw from the battle?"

"...What?"

"I'm told that he's doing really badly; pneumonia at best, and possibly much worse. To put it bluntly, he's absolutely not in any condition to fight. In the few days that we've known each other, I've seen what kind of knight Ikki Kurogane is, and I can tell that he'll drag his battered body to the arena if he has to. He's seriously going to try to win against me, because he's certain that he can win and determined to do it.

"I'm not the type to pull any punches against a foe, either. The moment he enters the arena, I plan to fight him with my entire heart and soul. If some unfortunate accident happened as a result..."

She's actually serious.

A shudder ran through Shizuku's whole body. Behind those glasses, the light shining in Touka's eyes made it all too clear that she hadn't exaggerated at any point; it wasn't out of the question that she would accidentally kill Ikki. Touka had summoned Shizuku because she knew that very event could come to pass.

"Please, I need you to stop him. I believe you're the only one who can do it, because you're his only family."

Shizuku didn't respond immediately. She considered what she was meant to do, and what would be most right for her to do.

"Let me sleep on it."

Still unsure, it took all her strength to squeeze out those few words.



When Shizuku left the room, Touka sighed, exhaling all the unease within her.

"Whether I win tomorrow, or Kurogane withdraws from the battle... Will I be

able to go to the Seven Stars with pride in my heart?”

She remembered the picture of the orphans’ smiles, along with the attached message. Could she fight a battle that would live up to their honest expectations of her? She couldn’t shake the anxiety the question created.

“Touka.” While she worried, her hand was enveloped in a small warmth. Utakata had grasped her hand with his and was looking up at her from his much shorter height. “I know it feels like everything’s gotten ridiculous because of some selfish adults’ circumstances, but you have to focus on yourself. Fight a fight that you can be proud of, because that’s what we all love about you. I’m sure that’s what Ikki wants too.”

Utakata was confident in that belief. No matter what anyone else thought, it didn’t matter; Touka just had to do what was right for her.

After Utakata spoke, Touka’s lips finally curled into a smile. Her duty was to put her all into what she could do.

That’s all I can do, after all.

“You’re right. Thanks, Uta. Okay!” she cried, slapping her own cheeks.

Pain shot through her, pushing out all of her worry and distress. It wasn’t time for her to be worried.

If he’ll crawl his way up to fight me, then I’ll offer no mercy. Touka would fight Ikki mercilessly, with every ounce of might and honor within her as a knight. And she would win. She was sure to. *I’ll win and move on to the Seven Stars with pride in my heart!*

When the long night was over, Hagun Academy greeted the final day of its fateful Seven Stars Battle Festival selection battles.



“Whew. Summer’s only just started and it’s already this hot. This one’s gonna be a scorcher.”

The morning of the final selection battle, the stationmaster of a train station near Hagun Academy wiped the sweat from his brow as he swept. The sky was clear and blue, pouring the sun’s inescapable, oppressive heat all over the land.

It was just the type of weather that made his tight, dark-blue uniform difficult to put up with.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of an approaching train, so he looked up to see a local train arriving at the platform. It slowly approached, and once it stopped, the doors opened. The stationmaster took three steps back, getting out of the way of the alighting customers.

Not that anyone would be getting off here at this time of day.

The only place accessible from the station was Hagun itself. Students might venture elsewhere on weekends, but there was no reason for the students of Hagun, a school with a mandatory dorm policy, to be at the station on a weekday morning.

Hm? A single man, bent over limply emerged sluggishly from the open door. An old man? Rare for someone to be here on a weekday.

Who was that man? The stationmaster directed his gaze at the old man with vague interest. He was at a loss for words; it was actually a young man—maybe even just a boy—who'd alighted. The boy should have been at an age where his energy was at its peak, but instead, he slowly crept out of the train, hunched over.

The stationmaster wasn't shocked merely because it was a boy, though; he was astonished by the awful state the boy, Ikki Kurogane, was in.

"Haah... Haah...!"

His frantic gasps were hoarse, and words couldn't describe how pale his face was. Behind his disheveled bangs, his murky eyes showed no signs of life. Worst of all, the amount of sweat that coated his forehead and dripped from his jaw was immense. Even with the intense heat, train cars were cooled; a healthy person wouldn't sweat inside one.

"H-Hey, are you okay?!"

"Yeah... Y-Yes, sir, I'm... fine."

"You don't look fine! I'll call an ambulance. Oh, hey! You're that guy!"

The stationmaster was startled when he saw Ikki's face. The boy standing

before him was, according to the papers, the one who had seduced and toyed with Princess Vermillion. Clear disgust showed on the stationmaster's face for a moment—disgust that Ikki didn't fail to notice.

“Thanks for your... concern, but... Sorry, I'm in a hurry, so...”

He bowed slightly to the stationmaster before walking past him, exiting the station.

“Ah...”

Ikki slowly disappeared into the distance, his steps shaky. Watching him, the stationmaster was bewildered.

He seemed like a really polite kid.

The media had painted him as a boy whose own family had admitted was a notoriously problematic child, but after seeing him in person, the stationmaster was unsure that he was even the same person.



Leaving the station, Ikki continued onto the road leading to Hagun. It was sloped gently, and the distance was just over half a mile. It was the same road Ikki jogged with Stella every morning.

Normally, the hills would be no issue for him, but given his condition, it was a Herculean feat just to trudge through them. His lungs felt as if they would burst from even the smallest breath. They refused nearly all of the oxygen offered to them.

It hurts so much...

He at least wanted to breathe, so he opened his mouth and gasped for air, but a sharp pain in his inflamed lungs forced him to expel all the air he'd just inhaled.

“Ack! Gah! Hagh!”

His lips were dyed a bluish purple due to the extreme lack of oxygen in his blood. The world was so indistinct as a result of the fever and suffocation that Ikki might as well have been unconscious. In place of his weakened ego, the drug's hallucinogenic properties had given him cowardice.

I'm supposed to fight Raikiri like this? I'll never beat her. It was impossible. Tantamount to suicide, even. That much had become all but clear; a hollow man with a hollow sword couldn't bring down someone like her. *I just wanna go to bed...*

Complaints floated through Ikki's mind as he slowly climbed the hill, all alone except for the absurd heat and the cicadas' chirps. Surrendering himself to oblivion seemed an alluring prospect.

"Ah..."

He tripped on a tiny pebble, falling down into the asphalt without even attempting to catch himself.

No... He had to get up. If he didn't get up, he wouldn't make it to the battle in time. If he didn't make it in time, he would lose. If he lost... *I wonder what would happen next.*

He could feel his mind dissolving into goop. The confusion from the drug and the haze from the high fever made Ikki unable to pinpoint what he was doing or where he was going.

Somewhere in the pool that once was his brain, Ikki noticed something impossible in the periphery of his vision: snow. At some point, the sky had darkened, ushering in a flurry of large snowflakes. That was impossible, though; it couldn't have been snowing in the middle of summer. He couldn't believe it.

So cold... Ikki was chilled to the bone. *Come to think of it, didn't it snow back then, too?*

The cold made him remember the day that his family had gathered to celebrate the new year. The day he had run away from home, unable to stand the pain anymore. Nobody had gone out to find him. Nobody had worried about him. He had just laid there, curled up in the snow, alone.

I'm still... the same as I was that day.

What was he doing? Unwanted, unsuccessful, unable to change anything. Ikki had remained curled up in that snowstorm for all that time.

What was it he was trying to do, battered as he was? He didn't know. He

couldn't remember anything. All he could feel was the helpless sluggishness of his body and the weight of his eyelids, until his consciousness disappeared into the cold depths.



The final day of selection battles saw much fewer battles than usual; the only people fighting were the twelve remaining undefeated students. As a result, there were more spectators than ever, especially in the first training field, where the duel between Raikiri and the Worst One would be fought. Students all throughout the stands raised their voices in surprise.

“Wow, so many people!”

“Well, duh. Everyone’s been clamoring to see the Raikiri and Worst One matchup.”

“Huh? Are those cameras down there?”

“Probably the news. You know what’s been going on.”

“Yeah, the scandal with the Worst One and the Crimson Princess. But I thought the media wasn’t allowed inside the school.”

“The Federation has a major part in this, so maybe they made an exception?”

“Maybe. Hey, do you guys believe those articles?”

“They’re definitely dating. Neither of them has denied it, and even if they had, they were suspiciously close.”

“Come to think of it, didn’t she confess to him during his fight with The Hunter?”

“Not that article! I’m talking about the one where Worst One’s family testified. They said he’s been a piece of crap since he was a kid and that now he’s some playboy or something.”

“Oh, that one.”

“I don’t think I believe it.”

“Me neither, actually. My Device is a katana, just like his, so I go to his sessions during lunch and learn swings and maneuvers from him all the time. He

always seemed so nice”

“I go to those too! In the courtyard, right? He started giving those lessons because his classmates kept bugging him.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I’ve met him in person, so I don’t believe a word of what those papers say. After all, even though it doesn’t help him at all during selection battles, he keeps patiently teaching us. I definitely can’t imagine him trying to trick the Crimson Princess.”

“But the testimony came from his family, y’know? Shouldn’t that mean it’s true? It’s not like they have any reason to lie about one of their own. Like, I’m sure they’d lie to *cover* for him, but definitely not to make him look bad.”

“Hm, I dunno.”

Looking down on the general bustle of the crowd—and the questions and doubts relating to Ikki mixed in—from the very top of the bowl-shaped arena, an amazed Nene Saikyou spoke to Kurono Shinguuji, who stood next to her.

“Huh, I guess not all the kids blindly believe the news like sheep.”

“Yep. Those who know Kurogane especially lean away from the official story.”

“You can tell at a glance that he’s harmless.”

“But the truth doesn’t matter anymore.” Kurono had a sour look on her face. What was right or wrong, truth or lies, fact or fiction regarding the Ikki controversy was riding on this battle. No matter how right Ikki was, and no matter how wrong Akaza was, the only way for Ikki to prove himself was through his sword. “I can’t believe they seriously did it. Bunch of bastards.”

Even Kurono hadn’t imagined they would pull such a stunt. She groaned at her naïveté for thinking that they just had to hold out until Stella’s father arrived.

“Mhmm. I’ll take that as a compliment.” The two of them heard a peculiarly delighted voice nearby. They both looked in the direction of the voice to find a keg-shaped man wiping sweat from his forehead. “Hello, ladies. Hot out here today, isn’t it?”

“Chairman Akaza.”

When Akaza appeared, their well-shaped faces both twisted into scowls. He certainly wasn't someone they would welcome with open arms.

"What do you want from us, you red fox?" Saikyou asked with a prickly voice.

"Now, now, no need to bare your fangs," Akaza replied with a smile. "I want nothing; I just happened to meet a man who wanted me to find you two. Here you are, sir."

He had brought a small, old man in a kimono and hakama pants to see them.

"Oh, there you are! With a campus this big, it's just impossible to find anything."

"Ugh, it's this old shit!"

The first to react was Saikyou. That was, of course, because the man before them was the God of War, Torajirou Nangou. At ninety-two years old, he was one of the greatest Mage-Knights in Japan. He was also Saikyou's teacher.

"Ohoho. My lovable apprentice, I see you're as foul-mouthed as ever. I find that pretty cute, truth be told."

"'C-Cute'? D-Don't be such a creep!"

"You're blushing, Nene. Seems like someone's secretly happy."

"Wh-Why would I be happy about being creeped on by a dried-up old shit like you?!"

She's so dishonest.

No matter how hard she tried, Saikyou's words alone wouldn't lessen the redness in her face. She had a long history with the man, and held him in greater esteem than she did anyone else in the world.

"Good to see you again as well, Kurono. Last time I saw you, your belly was bulging quite a bit. I assume the delivery went well?"

"Yes, fortunately."

"Good, good. But, heh, now that you've given birth, you've gotten a fair bit sexier. Especially around your hips here—"

"You old shit! Who do you think you are, coming here and leering at my

friend?! I'll kill you!"

"Ohoho. Nene, you're not getting any younger. Maybe instead of screeching at me, you should learn from Kurono how to have sex appeal. It'll be too late before long."

"Oh, trust me, Master Nangou. It's already far too late for her."

"I-I-It is *not*! I'm just trying to have fun! It's stupid to tie yourself down to just one man! Why are you on his side, anyway, Kuu?!"

Because you're always cuter when he's around.

Kurono felt the urge to tease her even more, to make up for all the times she was decidedly uncute. Not that she would tell Saikyou that, though.

"So, Master Nangou, why are you here today?"

Saikyou yelled at them in indignation for ignoring her, but that made Kurono ignore her even more as she spoke to Nangou. Her question was essentially just lip service, as Kurono could more-or-less grasp why he had come.

"I'm here to watch Touka's crowning moment, of course. Yes, I could've waited until the Festival, but how could I not drag myself here when her opponent is a Kurogane?"

Thought so.

Nangou wasn't just Saikyou's master; he was Touka's as well. He had noticed how resourceful she was not long prior and had been teaching her swordplay ever since. Raikiri, Touka's signature move that had become her nickname, was his own Otogiri optimized to fit her.

Beyond that, however, there was an even more important reason for his visit.

"Mhmhm. Master Nangou, you were a contemporary of the great hero Ryouma Kurogane. Some even call you lifelong rivals. I'm not surprised you're interested."

Nangou was ninety-two years old. He and Samurai Ryouma had been comrades in World War II, but they were rivals nonetheless.

Selection battle matchups weren't normally circulated outside the school, but

due to the mass media's influence, the matchup between Raikiri and the Worst One had been leaked to the public. Once he knew that his beloved disciple and his old rival's descendant would be competing against each other, there was no way Nangou would miss the opportunity to witness their battle.

"Oh, but Master Nangou," Akaza began with a mischievous smile plastered on his face, "I believe this battle may just be interrupted."

"What?!"

Kurono's eyebrows tensed up at the indescribable malice that lay in his voice. Almost simultaneously, an announcement echoed through the venue.

"May I have everyone's attention. The time has come for the battle between Touka Toudou and Ikki Kurogane to start, but Ikki Kurogane has not yet arrived at his waiting room. According to the selection battle rules, if he does not arrive within the next ten minutes, it will result in a loss by default."

"As I recall, Chairman Akaza, you were supposed to bring Kurogane here by car. You told me I didn't need to come and meet him."

"Mhmhm, well, I am sorry. I juuust happened to forget, see. Deepest apologies. But the Federation branch office isn't very far from here; I'm sure he could make it by himself if he took the train. Well, he didn't seem to be in peak condition, so who knows? Maybe he dropped dead along the way? Mhmhm!"

Jackass.

The discomfort welling up within Kurono caused her to clench her fist hard enough to stop the blood from flowing through it. She felt a smaller hand touch hers as it trembled. Saikyou looked up at her frowning friend and held a fan over her own mouth, whispering so that only Kurono could hear.

"Don't lose your cool, Kuu. No matter what the details are, Kurogane accepted this duel. Now's not the time for us to butt in; we'll act once it's all over."

"Yeah. You're right," Kurono said, unraveling her fist with the knowledge that Saikyou was just as angry as she was. The two women were determined that, regardless of Ikki's victory or defeat, the red fox would not leave in one piece.

Meanwhile, the red fox in question watched the arena with glee as the timer ticked down, unaware of their desire to end him. Everything was going according to his plan—Ikki would be banned from the Federation, and if everything was brought to a close in a way that pleased Itsuki, he would be promoted from Chairman of the Ethics Committee to Head of Public Relations. To a brighter, more open world, unlike the underground part of the Federation building.

Then I can finally be free from the role of the bad guy. The Ethics Committee, often criticized for being akin to secret police, had been a position of glory back in the military police era. Since then, however, it had gained a much darker connotation. An upright man would never choose to live in obscurity the way they did, and Akaza was no different. *Apologies to you, Ikki, but I'll have to crush you beneath my feet.*

He didn't care what happened; even if Ikki were killed, it meant nothing. It wasn't his problem.



Ikki's mind remained in that snowstorm. While he lay huddled amidst the falling snow, he remembered how it all began. It was a day much like the current one—one that chilled him to the bone.

That was the day Ikki Kurogane was truly born. He had met Ryouma Kurogane, and for the first time in his life, he had been told to believe in himself. It had made him so happy.

Several months after, Ryouma had died of old age, but his words had lived on in Ikki's heart. He had hoped to one day, when someone else had hit the wall known as talent and had given up, unable to progress, be the kind of person who could have offered words of encouragement to them. Ever since that day, he had continued to fight his hardest.

If not for that encounter, Ikki wouldn't have existed as the man he was. His meeting with Ryouma was his pride. However, a voice just like his own whispered into his ears.

"Was that meeting really for the best? Didn't it just wreak more havoc on your life, causing you endless pain and solitude?"

Ikki's muddled mind forced images of the past up to the surface. Back in elementary school, despite the blood that had covered his skinned-raw hands, Ikki had kept swinging Intetsu. At the time, he'd had no idea if what he was doing was right or if he could truly become stronger. He'd known so little at that point that he'd used manga as serious reference material.

No matter how many dead ends he'd reached, nobody would teach him, so Ikki had instead hid in the brush and watched the branch family kids train, then imitating them.

He remembered just how lonely it had been. Ikki had constantly been reminded that he would never experience the kindness and stern discipline the Kurogane family's hired instructors would offer the other kids.

The next thought that floated to the surface was a certain dojo. Having graduated to middle school, Ikki had visited dojos to hone his martial arts skills. He and one such dojo had arranged a one-on-one match, but as soon as the gong signaled the start of the battle, all of the other disciples had jumped on him from behind and pinned him down.

"When I'm through with you, you'll never be foolish enough to storm a dojo ever again," his opponent, the master of the dojo, had said, taking Ikki by the hand.

He then forcefully snapped Ikki's pinky finger, with every other one of his fingers having suffered the same fate. Nobody at the dojo had made so much as an attempt to save him; they had all laughed raucously, as if they had been having a wonderful time breaking all of the little boy's fingers. The pain and terror from that near-lynching were still branded into Ikki's mind.

One last memory came to his mind—one from merely a year earlier.

"C'mon, now. If you don't fight back, you'll never prove your strength! I, The Hunter, have named you my opponent, so fight me, dammit!"

Kirihara had been filling Ikki with holes like he was swiss cheese, while the teachers had just glared at him.

"Sorry, Kurogane. I can't really be your friend anymore."

Following that, a friend had abandoned him.

“Here you are now, groveling yet again,” the Ikki-like voice whispered. “This is all thanks to Ryouma Kurogane’s irresponsible encouragement. If you had just toed the line like your father told you to, none of this would have happened. You wouldn’t have had to drag your dying body to a battle that only spells death.

“Living beyond your means will only lead to unhappiness. People have a set domain based on the resources available to them. Anyone who chooses to push their way out will only be met with pain and solitude.

“So, have you had enough yet? Have you realized how pointless it is? Then just relax. Live your life unbound by the foolish words of a dead man. Sleep here, and soon, it will all be over. You will never made to suffer by the hand of Ryouma Kurogane’s words again. Now...”

Rest. All he had to do was rest. Continuing the way he was would only lead to more pain. If he just went to sleep, all would be well. He could relax.

Ikki knew that. He knew that, and yet...

“AaaAAHHHHHHH!”

His festering throat unleashed a cracking roar as he lifted his weak body from the asphalt. Through the snowstorm, he moved step by step, climbing the hill anew.

“Stop this,” the voice called to him. “Why do you insist on hurting yourself?”

Ikki himself didn’t even know the answer to that question. His mind and memories, lost somewhere in the murk, were failing to even conjure up thought. Only one thing was visible at the very edge of his consciousness: a red flame.

No, it was red hair that, like a flame, gently wavered and scattered sparks as it went. Whose hair was it? Who was behind those flames?

In his condition, Ikki couldn’t even remember that much. However, there was an incredible, unbearable stirring in his heart when that image arose. Though he knew not who it was, just the fluttering off that hair lit a fire in his frozen heart and spurred his exhausted body to act.

“Just rest. There’s no way you can beat Raikiri, and nobody expects you to be

able to. When you arrive, what will you do? What can you do the way you are?"

Ikki didn't know. In fact, he wasn't even sure of where he was going or what he was doing, but trusting in the warmth in his heart, Ikki finally remembered something.

Oh, right... I made a promise.

"...to...gether. ...knight...hood."

He remembered not exactly what it was, but it was a promise he held dear, made with a person he held dear.

That wasn't all, either. He also heard voices. They were incomprehensible, but the commotion made up of many familiar voices spurred him forward.

So I have to go...

That was Ikki's answer. The voice that had once tried to beguile Ikki with comforting words sighed, thoroughly annoyed.

"Really? You're going to keep hurting yourself?" Its pitch-black face warped into a distorted grin. *"Well, it's pointless."*

Ah...

Just as he arrived at Hagun Academy's front gate, Ikki's knees buckled and he fell once again. No matter how strong his drive, his body couldn't keep up. He couldn't move forward. He couldn't even stand. The man known as Ikki Kurogane had reached his absolute limit.

"It's over for you."

He fell inanimately, like a marionette with its strings cut, and fell to the ground, unable to rise again.

Or so he thought. but as he fell, a warm, gentle force caught him. The force then spoke, stifling some sort of emotion.

"Welcome back, Big Brother."

That voice, as pretty and clear as a bell's chime, pulled the name of one person from the pile that was Ikki's memories. It brought back the name and the memories of Ikki's beloved little sister.

“Shizuku...”



After saving Ikki from his fall, Shizuku hoarsely explained everything to him.

“After what Touka said to me last night, I couldn’t stop worrying.”

Should she have stopped him? Honestly, Shizuku wanted to stop her poor brother. He’d had enough. He’d tried and tried, more than he’d needed to. Shizuku didn’t want Ikki to hurt any more than he already did. She didn’t want him to suffer.

“Give up on knighthood and go back home.”

Home may have been a cage for Ikki, but at least Shizuku would be with him; she wouldn’t let him be alone anymore. She could love him as a mother, a sister, a friend, a partner, and more. She could give him anything he wanted, so she wanted nothing more than to let him rest.

“But when I was thinking about it, I realized I just couldn’t bring myself to stop you. When you’re here at school, you smile. You look so happy.” Back home, that was unthinkable. Though Ikki would occasionally smile for Shizuku, he had never truly smiled for himself. He had finally gained a smile for himself; how could Shizuku take that away from him? “So I made a little bet. If you came here of your own volition, I would take you to your duel and shout my support for you at the top of my lungs.”

Along with Shizuku’s voice, there was a clamor of other voices.

“There you are, man! You can win this!”

“The battle hasn’t started yet! Hurry!”

“You’re not far from the arena, Kurogane! You can do it!”

“Ikki! Fiiight!”

“One final push! Show us your grit!”

Those voices belonged to people Shizuku had run to and gathered for the sake of reaching her brother. Friends, classmates, his students, past opponents—so many people were waiting for him at the front gate.

Ikki stared at the gaggle, dumbfounded, as Shizuku continued.

“Big Brother, I won’t ask what they told you or how they cornered you, because I can imagine it well enough on my own. But please, never forget that you’re not alone. You were at first, perhaps for far too long. Now, however, all these people are here to support you. Stella and Alice couldn’t come because of their own battles, but they’re praying for your victory. The Worst One is our hero. So...

“I want you to fight. Fight, and win!”



Shizuku’s cries of support definitely reached Ikki’s consciousness despite it being lost in the snowstorm. He took another look through his misty vision.

“I want you to fight. Fight, and win!”

His silver-haired sister was there.

“The next edition of the Bulletin needs you on the cover! Don’t lose now!”

A cute girl with glasses was there too.

“Kurogane, this is the moment of truth!”

A tall girl, one of his students, was there.

“I believe in you. As your teacher, I know you’re not the kind of boy to lose like this.”

“Yeah, Pres is strong, but you beat *me*. Show her what you’ve got!”

“Yep! Where there’s a will, there’s a way!”

“Ikki! We know you can win!”

His other swordplay students, upperclassmen who always supported him, classmates, the teacher who had gotten him into the academy, past rivals he’d fought with the Seven Stars on the line—all of them were calling Ikki’s name. The sight of it birthed conviction in his heart.

Yeah. I finally get it.

Ikki finally knew what drove him forward after his body had reached its limit.

It was their voices, and the emotions behind them. Those who loved him, those who admired him, and even those whose dreams had been crushed by him. Everyone present had entrusted their feelings to Ikki in some way. Thus, they called out to him. Their voices and feelings pushed him forward.

When Utakata had told him, “The two of you simply carry different weights”, Ikki had thought he was carrying nothing. But that was wrong. Ikki had surpassed his own limit and realized the weight he carried; the weight of the dreams entrusted to him by others.

I guess I became that kind of person at some point.

Ikki felt a fire growing within himself when that conviction arose. The warmth of it spread through him via the movement of his blood, returning his strength. His collapsed pile of thoughts and memories returned to form, and the haze in his mind cleared.

It was time for him to fight. How could he just give up when so many people were entrusting their feelings to him? And most of all, though she was absent, he still had his promise with Stella, the girl with that hair of flame.

“So let’s go, together, to the peak of knighthood.”

He could clearly recall their vow. If he was going to make it happen, he couldn’t lose to Raikiri.

“Thank you. Shizuku, Kusakabe, Ayatsuji, Tomaru, Saijou, Ms. Oreki, and everyone.”

Before he realized it, the snowstorm was gone. Ikki thanked them and left Shizuku behind, moving under his own power again. He stood tall as he advanced toward the duel, with the strength he gained from his friends. Fear no longer had any place in his heart.

“There’s no way you can beat Raikiri, and nobody expects you to be able to.”

Those words were spoken by the weakling inside Ikki. Finally, he had a clear rebuttal: *I can beat her*. He and his opponent were equal knights, bearing equal weight.

If he was honest, she was a very powerful opponent; maybe too powerful for

him in his current state. The more he thought about it, the more disadvantages he saw weighing him down.

Even so, he would do everything he could. It was his duty to do so, for the sake of everyone who gave him the strength to keep on going.

“Then off I—”

Suddenly, a voice echoed high into the summer sky.

“Ikkiiii!”

An incredibly powerful, beautiful voice, lovelier than any melody.



“Stella...!”

“Thank God! You really... made it...”

The fiery-haired girl who yelled and dashed over to Ikki began to pant heavily, murmuring something. Shizuku, behind Ikki, gasped in shock at her sudden appearance.

“H-Hey, Stella?! Weren’t you supposed to be in a battle?!”

Indeed, that was the source of her surprise. Stella was a candidate for the Seven Stars Battle Festival, as she had maintained an unblemished win streak throughout her selection battles. Like Alice, who was also absent, she should have been in the middle of her battle. Why was she at the front gate?

Stella didn’t answer the question with words, instead using her actions. She presented an object with such excitement that she might as well have thrown it into Ikki’s face.

“Ikki, I kept our promise. I’m a Seven Stars rep now!”



The item she held was a medal that proved she had been selected by Hagun Academy to be a representative at the Seven Stars. Stella had already completed her final battle by defeating another undefeated student in record time, a mere three seconds. She had done that just to be there for Ikki during his final battle.

She had wondered what she should do—what she *could* do—to help Ikki in his solitary war. The answer she had come up with was to keep her end of their promise and to come find him. It was a surefire way to give him courage.

“So go out there and win, Ikki! Then we’ll go, together, to the peak of knighthood!”

Ikki felt tears welling up in his eyes. He really did have an amazing girlfriend. It wasn’t just that she had come so far to support his exhausted self. In that moment, Stella had given him so much courage, so much strength.

Her love is the best thing I could have ever hoped for.

Ikki had to keep being worthy of her love; a proud man who was just as strong as she was.

His weak-spirited thought of “*I’ll do what I can*” was shattered by the sound of her voice. Ikki had to leave his friends with better parting words. “Off I go” wasn’t good enough, so instead, he declared:

“I’m off to win!”



“Mm-hmm. Okay. All right. Thanks for calling.” Utakata thanked the caller and pulled his student handbook away from his ear. He then sat down in a chair in the waiting room before telling Touka, whose eyes were closed while she focused herself, “Renren called. Ikki’s here.”

“Mm,” Touka replied shortly, groaning.

Her bangs hung over her face, hiding her expression. Utakata couldn’t begin to understand what was going on in her heart.

Ikki had arrived. Faced with a truth that she had initially wanted to avoid, Touka—

“...Heheh.”

Utakata felt his body hair stand on end as Touka’s lips warped with delight. Lightning crackled in the air around her as a result of her exhilaration, causing Utakata to swallow speechlessly.

That really flipped her switch.

The last time he had seen Touka like that was when she’d fought Moroboshi at the Festival the year before. It was out of sheer kindness that had Touka worried about Ikki’s health and wished he would surrender, but in their world—a world of fighting—kindness alone wouldn’t bring anyone to the top four in the nation. The ferocity and brutality necessary to submerge one’s foe in a pool of their own blood ruled the other side of Touka’s personality.

At least she doesn’t show this side too often.

Ikki had forced Touka to get serious. The sheer nobility of the boy known as Ikki Kurogane had made her accept him as a powerful foe. She wouldn’t hold back in the slightest; she was going to give the half-dead Worst One all she had. He didn’t have even a fraction of a chance at victory.

“Touka Toudou, your battle is about to begin. Please make your way to the arena.”

“All right. Here I go, Uta.”

She slowly stood from her chair and disappeared through the door to the red gate. Utakata watched as she left, her form overflowing with vitality. He couldn’t help but pity the dying boy who had to face her.

I’m sorry for what’s about to happen to you, Worst One. Consider this matchup just bad luck.



“All right, everyone. We apologize for the long wait, but now, it’s time to begin the final selection battle for the Seven Stars Battle Festival! From the red gate, Raikiri appears!

Nineteen wins, zero defeats. She’s the student council president and it shows—her overwhelming strength has helped her come out of every battle

unscathed! Despite Hagun's overall poor performance as of late, her continuous victories have shone the light of courage on all of us! Hagun Academy's pride and joy, our radiant number-one star! Walking the path of glory, this star is off to battle to secure her final victory and her place at the Seven Stars! It's the third-year student Touka Toudou, everybody! With everyone's anticipation at her back, she has taken the stage!"

Touka showed herself in the arena. She stood with her back straight, watching the blue gate with dignity.

"What amazing concentration." Stella, watching from afar, could feel just how energetic she was. "Even at this distance, my skin is tingling!"

Shizuku, however, having experienced Raikiri's power firsthand, felt differently. The moment Touka appeared in the arena, she felt fear run through her; the terror was so great that she wanted to look away.

But she did not. Instead, she held her trembling shoulders and continued looking down at the arena, suppressing the urge to flee.

"Shizuku, are you okay?"

"I'm not, honestly. But my brother is doing his absolute best, so I can't leave him now. I'll watch this battle until it's over, no matter how it ends."

"And from the blue gate, we have another undefeated nineteen-streaker—although the road he took to get here was entirely different from Raikiri's! Never given the time of day, never accepted by anyone, a lone wolf left for dead in the abyss. But he's clawed his way back up! The Crimson Princess, The Hunter, and even Runner's High! He mowed down Hagun's most famous knights like nobody's business! There's not a single person in this school who doesn't know his name! Hagun's favorite Rank F: first-year Ikki Kurogane, the Worst One! This wolf bares his fangs toward the sky, ready to sink his teeth into a star!"

Following Touka's entrance, Ikki appeared from the blue gate. He entered the arena with sure steps and a stalwart stature that betrayed the fact that he was half-dead.

"D-Doesn't he seem a little different?"

“Yeah. His expression isn’t any different, though, is it?”

“He’s scary to look at...”

The audience stirred. They felt something in the way he stood, even if they couldn’t put it into words—though some members of the crowd had an idea of what it was.

“Oho, so that’s Touka’s opponent? He’s strong, that’s for sure.”

“You can tell, Master Nangou?”

“Of course I can, just look at how tense he is. This little man is ready to die here, if necessary. He’s walking into battle with that much determination; even the audience is taken aback by his resolve. I didn’t know Kurogane was that sort of man, but I have a feeling this battle will be a treat to watch.”

“For real. Then again, while he’s not showing it on his face, the fatigue is definitely wearing on him. You think he has any chance of beating Touka like that, Kuu?”

“Mhmhm. Whether he can or not, he has to face her. This is his duel, after all.”

Ignoring Akaza’s interruption, Kurono looked down as she answered.

“Well, the outlook is bleak. I doubt he’ll be able to fully swing his sword more than once or twice. Kurogane has to be careful here; he ought to know Raikiri’s killing tactic well by now.”

“Hm? Does she have one?”

Kurono thought of ignoring his question as well, but decided she was tired of listening to such a greasy fatass speak. Thus, she turned to Akaza and explained.

“Basically, Raikiri is a quickdraw attack. If her sword isn’t sheathed, she can’t use it. Through repeated, careful in-and-out attacks, he can apply pressure that will neutralize Toudou’s Raikiri and other Noble Arts. The moment she unsheathes that sword, she’ll become unable to use Raikiri. If Kurogane has a chance, that’s where it lies. But, to make that chance a reality, he’ll have to fight a patient, drawn-out battle despite his pain.”

It was a disadvantageous battle, but rushing to end it would hurt his chances

even further. He was up against the close-range queen, Raikiri, after all. If he charged right in, he would eat her all-powerful trump card. Ittou Shura, which multiplied his strength by dozens of times, still wasn't enough to break through Raikiri, so a drawn-out battle would be his best bet.

Saikyou was of the same mind, but a single knight there had a different opinion.

"Oho, I see. You suggest a drawn-out battle, then, Kurono?" It was Nangou. Behind his wrinkled eyelids, his eyes shone with the shrewdness of a hawk's. "I bet this battle will be settled in a single slash."

Meanwhile, the crowd was beginning to go wild watching the two fighters in the arena. In the midst of the tempest, Touka offered a few words to Ikki.

"I have to apologize to you, Kurogane."

"Why's that?"

"I kept on hoping you wouldn't come here. I even begged your sister to make you forfeit the match. But while I was doing those hypocritical things... I was still desperately looking forward to this fight!"

"Ah!"

"Kurogane, I know you're already deeply hurt all over, and your fatigue is plain to see. But I'm still so helplessly excited, because ever since the moment I met you, I've always, *always* wanted to fight you!"

She spread her feet as her lips drew into a smile. Lightning ran through the air, converging at Touka's palm until it became Narukami. Her expression showed that she could hardly wait for the battle to begin—and the same went for Ikki.

"I agree wholeheartedly," he declared, materializing his own katana in his right hand.

It was true that he had always thought the same thing. Who was stronger, him or Raikiri? Could he defeat such a foe? At times, he would get so worried about it that his mind would be taken over by doubt, like fog seeping in, but there she was, directly in front of him.

“As long as I stand here as a knight, I won’t swing my sword in a way that would bring shame to me, you, or the people pushing you forward. So here I swear...” Ikki said, raising the sword in his right hand and pointing the tip at Touka. “I’ll use my greatest weakness to shatter your indomitable strength!”

He swore that he would win. That was why he had come, after all.

“After a short exchange, these two greats now face each other, Devices in hand! A girl who has seen the summit, and a boy who crawled up from the depths. Who is truly stronger? With their place at the Seven Stars Battle Festival on the line, these knights begin their final battle! Now, everyone, say it with me! Let’s go ahead!”



When the buzzer sounded, everyone present at the scene saw something unbelievable. Before it had even fallen silent, blue light radiated from Ikki and he charged at Touka.

“Wh-Whoa! Kurogane opens with his trump card, Ittou Shura! He’s attacking at the very start!”

The crowd was restless—Ikki had never used his Ittou Shura at the start of a match until this point.

Why would he? The technique had a strict time limit of one minute; if his target fled in that time, he’d be done for. Instead, he would trade blows with his opponent, reading their plans from top to bottom and learning their methods. He would never use it before doing so.

However, Ikki had discarded that pattern, because he didn’t have the stamina to read Touka’s plans from even the smallest of engagements. Had the fatigue forced him to rush the battle that much?

That was a reckless decision, Kurogane! Kurono gritted her teeth at the sight. He should have been prepared to take some risks and draw out the fight. Forcing the end of the match while he still had stamina would may have worked in a more favorable situation, but in his current position, it was beyond foolish. *Doesn’t he know that he’s up against the Raikiri?!*

She was among the top four student knights in the country. A suicide attack

wouldn't work on her. He would either fall to her Raikiri, or she would escape him with Shippuu Jinrai. Either way, this decision left Ikki with no chance at victory.

Kurono and Saikyou looked down on the fight with grim expressions. Shizuku and Alice, other powerful students, did the same. The recklessness he was displaying caused their faces to warp with despair.

From among them, however, Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess, grinned slightly.

Jeez, Ikki. Even when your livelihood as a knight is on the line, you're still so crazy. She knew why he had chosen the path he did. Raikiri was a quickdraw attack, so all one had to do to stifle it was to attack while Touka's sword was unsheathed. *Even I know as much, so of course you've noticed.*

Still, Ikki hadn't chosen that option. Why? Was it because he judged that he had too little stamina to follow through with that plan? No, there was more to it than that. Stella knew his wasn't a clever decision, and she was right to think so.

I've known this from the very start!

Ever since he met Touka, Ikki had known that he would defeat her by defeating Raikiri. The super-electromagnetic quickdraw Raikiri was so powerful that it became her title as a knight, after all. How could he claim victory without challenging and defeating that attack?

Frankly, his body was at its limit. He had enough magic left within him to use Ittou Shura without difficulty, but his stamina wouldn't be able to keep up with it. In fact, he probably only had one swing worth of energy left within him.

However, that was all he needed. No feints, no wasted stamina. Ikki would move in a straight line until he was at point-blank range, where he would put all of his strength into a single stroke, and in doing so, he would defeat the invincible Raikiri. That was the utmost form of sincerity he could show Touka, who had risen to the field of a battle swirling with conspiracy.

This is my own challenge!

However unfavorable the odds, Ikki would not fight a battle he would regret, nor would he fight in a way that disappointed his opponent. With that

determination in his heart, he ran, shining with the light of life.

“I’ll use my greatest weakness to shatter your indomitable strength!”

As she watched him, Touka Toudou came to understand that the words he’d said before the match were his genuine thoughts. She didn’t even need Reverse Sight to read his impulses; the sheer determination approaching her told the whole story. Ikki Kurogane had decided that the first slash in their battle would also be the last, so he charged in, aiming for her Raikiri counterattack.

Her victory was assured. She simply had to fake using Raikiri before jumping far back, forcing him to fumble his full-body attack. Then, once he was completely exhausted, she could harass him from outside of his range. He would be helpless, leading to her victory.

As if!

Close-range combat was the domain of Raikiri, in which it had never been bested. It was where Touka was at her most powerful, so she didn’t even entertain the idea.

What would a queen be if she shamelessly fled from her territory just because an enemy attacked? Where would she fight if not where she was the strongest? Most of all, why would she flee from a knight who, despite the pain and fatigue he faced, challenged her invincible technique with all his strength? Who could take pride in a victory like that?

I’m not here to protect my number-one spot at Hagun! I’m here to defeat this proud knight and become the Seven Stars King! I’ll accept his challenge with the indomitable strength of my Raikiri!

Touka widened her stance and sent lightning coursing through Narukami’s scabbard in preparation to use her trump card: a single strike that had cut down every single person to ever fall victim to it.

Ready to draw her sword, she unleashed her counterattack upon the approaching Ikki. Like her foe, she would bet everything on a single slash in a fair fight that would bring mutual pride to both knights. That was the noble path of knighthood—the path on which the two knights faced each other.

Ikki would unleash his Seventh Secret Sword: Raikou. An invisible swing that

made his swordplay impossible to trace, it was the fastest of all his seven sword arts. Its speed was like that of lightning as it struck the earth, which made it all the more fitting that the counterattack directed at him was Raikiri, an electricity-based quickdraw that could tear through even lightning.

Both swords were guided by superhuman speed, so the result of the matchup would be decided by the depth of feelings behind them: the prayers of those who supported each fighter from the bottom of their hearts, and the knights' pure desire to defeat the foe before them. They put all of that and more into the embodiments of their souls, and with every last ounce of their strength, both knights swung their swords.

“Haaahhhhh!”

“Yaaaaahhhhh!”

Their blades were as lightning bolts. Though their point-blank strikes both tore through the air at incredible speed, Raikiri was slightly faster.

No! This isn't enough! The approaching plasma blade burned so brightly that its color was imperceptible. *I can't make it like this!*

Faced with her speed and power, Ikki foresaw his own defeat. The unsheathed Raikiri was unfettered and merciless, controlled by a woman who was prepared to kill if necessary. It was a gorgeous exhibition of swordplay; Touka Toudou was truly a powerful knight.

So what?!

Ikki knew that she was strong. He also knew that he was inferior to most, but he had never turned away from that fact. He kept fighting, not once trying to escape that unbearable truth. That was why he knew what he had to do in such a situation.

If he was inferior, he had to gather his strength. If he couldn't make it, he had to strain himself further. A minute was too long; all he needed was a single second.

Ikki honed his soul. Sight, taste, hearing, touch, smell—not one of his senses was useful to him as he swung. In that single instant, Ikki didn't even need to breathe. He abandoned everything irrelevant and concentrated his remaining

power.

His muscles, his marrow, his bones, his cells. From it all, he wrung every last drop of vitality, stamina, magic, and potential in his body, all to break beyond his limits.



When their steel blades collided, a gale of wind blew in all directions. The impact created a flash that robbed the world of color momentarily, and the rumble that accompanied it was akin to a thunderclap that could be heard from hundreds of miles away, with not a sound to be heard once it subsided.

Clang!

In the silence, the sound of metal breaking echoed through the venue, followed by that of someone falling. The crowd had been forced to close their eyes from the sheer brilliance of the lightning strike-like clash, but slowly, timidly, they opened their eyes and looked into the arena.

The shattered weapon was Narukami, and the one who had fallen along the royal path of knighthood was the Raikiri, Touka Toudou.



“H-He broke iiiit! I-I can’t believe it! All it took was one crossing of blades, one trading of blows, and Toudou’s Narukami—along with her very own Raikiri—has been shatteered! Toudou has fallen, and she isn’t getting up! A referee is running over now! Can she continue the fight, or...?!”

The crowd watched with bated breath as the referee approached Touka and made his decision. He squatted down for a moment, looked her over, then finally stood and crossed his arms to form an X.

“The referee has ruled her unable to battle! The duel is oveer! What a finish! What an end! It only took a fraction of a second, but the strongest knight in Hagun Academy has been bested! The last one standing, the victor of this match, is the Worst One, Ikki Kuroganeeee!”

The moment the winner’s name was announced, the crowd erupted into cheers, shaking the venue. The audience turned into a crucible of excitement, with many members expressing their shock.

“N-No way...”

“H-He really won! He beat *the* Raikiri!”

“Unbelievable! The president lost at close range?!”

“Hey, I’ve never seen someone break a Device before. Is she alive?”

“Yaaaaay! Ikki, you’re the best!”

Watching Ikki as he dragged himself out of the arena, Stella immediately ran over toward the blue gate to meet him.

“Aren’t you going, Shizuku?” Kagami asked the silver-haired girl, whom she had watched the battle together with, but Shizuku just shook her head slightly. “Are you waiting so he can be alone with Stella? On a day like this, I don’t think they’d mind you being there.”

“No...”

“Shizuku?”

The tiny girl merely sat down in place. Kagami then realized that Shizuku wanted to go, but couldn’t get her body to move. Her beloved older brother had dragged his near-dead body into battle against a woman who had put all her strength into a single strike against him, unhesitating despite his poor state.

Though Ikki had won, it was only by a hair. If he had made even the tiniest slip-up, he could have lost his head. That tension—and the resulting relief from being released from it—had drained Shizuku of all her energy.

“I’m so glad you’re okay. So glad...!”

Shizuku was so overcome with emotion that she could only sit and cry in relief. The poor girl had been so tense since the night before.

“Did you see that, Nene?”

“Yeah, duh. That Kurogane boy is one hell of a guy.”

Nangou and Saikyou—two of the esteemed Mage-Knights watching from the very top of the stands—had seen something. When the two steel lightning bolts that were Raikou and Raikiri collided, Ikki had accelerated even further.

“Ittou Shura, a technique that uses all of Ikki’s power in one minute, couldn’t defeat Raikiri. He knew that, so the man did it all in one swing instead of one minute! With even more staggering concentration than in his one-minute-transformation, he multiplied his strength not by dozens, but by *hundreds*, putting it all into the power and speed of his swing!”

If the normal use of Ittou Shura could be seen as using all of one’s strength to

run a hundred yards, then what Ikki had just done was to condense all of those hundred yards into a single step. That was no human feat; it was something possible only for a man who had descended into the very depths of hell, the domain of the Asura. A limit that surpassed limits, eclipsing even humanity to become a demon. Its name: Ittou Rasetsu.

“But that was a mere trick. It wasn’t what decided the match.”

“Master Nangou?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, you old shit?”

“Touka used her Raikiri with the resolve to kill that Kurogane boy. It was the most beautiful, unhesitant swordplay I’ve ever seen, and there’s no doubt it was faster than the boy’s. But the moment he reached his limit, he evolved. It all happened in the nick of time, for the sole purpose of defeating Touka.

“I can only imagine that’s what he’s always done. With nothing to his name, nothing given to him by anyone, he always fights tooth and nail, believing in his own potential. He endlessly hones himself to become faster than he was one minute ago, stronger than he was one second ago.

“In the end, it was that minor difference. Touka used the limits of her strength in her attack, that much is certain, but during their battle, that boy forced his own limits to grow. His persistent effort to increase his own potential was what earned him this victory. Very fitting for a man like him.”

Nangou squinted his eyes, already narrow from his sagging skin, and watched Ikki exit the ring as though he were an old friend.

“I-Impossible! Do you even hear yourself?! He was half-dead! For that to lead to this, there must have been some kind of mistake! That’s it, it’s all a mistake! Something went wrong! You think I’ll accept this outcome?!”

Akaza, unable to process what had happened right before his eyes, screamed as he ran out of the stands.

“Kuu, you’re not gonna follow him?” Saikyou asked, shooting a glance at his round form as he waddled away. “He’s definitely up to no good.”

“Honestly, I wanted to make him pay for everything he’s put us through, but it

feels stupid now,” Kurono replied, having also assumed he was scheming. “It doesn’t matter whether or not we leave him; he can’t do anything anymore. No matter what he tries, it’s too late. The situation’s out of his hands. A nationally-renowned knight, family ties, injustice, an absurd fight—Ikki Kurogane faced all that and more head-on, and with a single slash, he cut the Gordian Knot.”

Nobody would entertain any objections to the result. News cameras had caught the entire spectacle, including the moment the great Raikiri fell to the Worst One.

“It doesn’t matter how much Kurogane’s family wants to abuse him anymore,” she continued. “The world’s not going to let him go that easily. Thanks to this battle, the name ‘Worst One’—or perhaps ‘Another One’—is echoing around the world as we speak.”



Their cheers sound so distant, Ikki thought, as if listening to rain outside his window. His consciousness had separated entirely from his physical form; if he relaxed his grip on himself even a little bit, he would probably collapse.

Maybe it was okay for him to collapse. He had already won the battle, after all. Despite that, however, he continued to push his legs forward. There was somewhere he needed to go, someone he needed to see.

I have to tell her something... right now.

So he walked through the blue gate, leaving the cheering crowd behind.

“Ikki!”

There, the person he wanted to meet came to him from beyond it.

Lucky me.

Ikki wasn’t sure if he could make it to the audience stands. Stella opened her arms to receive Ikki as he fell into her chest. She embraced him, her large chest pressing into him as she spoke.

“Great job out there, Ikki. Hic...!”

She was sobbing. Ikki looked up and saw that her face was wet with tears.

“Did I make you worry that much?”

“YES! Yes, you did! Hic! You got *abducted*! I didn’t see you for weeks! And when you come back, you’re half-dead! Worst of all, you start going on about fighting Raikiri head-on despite all that! How stupid can you be, Ikki?! I can’t believe you, you big, stupid dummy!”

Haha... he thought. Guess she didn’t like my joke.

“But y’know, I’m a dummy, too.”

“Huh?”

“Because I fell in love with you even though you keep doing things like that.”

She held him even tighter.

There’s that warmth...

The heat of Stella’s body had given Ikki’s frozen self so much strength. Back when he fell into that snowstorm, he had thought it was all over. He hadn’t had an ounce of energy left within him.

It was her warmth that gave him the power to go on. Though Ikki couldn’t even remember her name at that point, she had brought his corpse back to life.

Thank you.

If Stella hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have been able to make it as far as he did. He would have been left buried in the snow, thrown away definitively by his own father, unable to cope with the feeling of loss.

Because she was there, he had been able to dig himself out of it. Because she was there, he had been able to keep fighting. That was the reason he chose to say it. He had decided that when his battle was over, if he had won, he would tell her.

“Stella.” Ikki inhaled deeply and held Stella with all the strength left in him. He had decided that when his battle was over, once he had won, he would tell her. “I want us to be a family.”

All the love in his heart was poured into those few short words. Decisive words that he could never have said before. Words that would take their

relationship beyond just boyfriend and girlfriend.

He felt Stella start to quiver, but it only lasted an instant. She quickly squeezed him even tighter and replied with a voice that sounded as though she was ready to cry, her expression a mix of bashfulness and unimaginable joy.

“Me too. Marry me, Ikki.”



Hearing those words, relief washed over Ikki's heart and he finally released his grasp on consciousness.

"Ikki...? Ikki, no! Wake up!"

His body hung limply in Stella's arms. He was breathing, but very weakly. She knew at a glance that he was in critical condition. Even worse, she found that beneath his clothes, he was covered in blood. The several-hundred-times multiplication of his strength was something the human body couldn't handle.

I have to get him to the infirmary!

"Stoop!"

Before Stella could move Ikki to safety, a barrel-shaped man blocked her path. It was Mamoru Akaza, his face dripping with sweat and no sign of sanity remaining in his bloodshot eyes. He had failed, and he would be made to take responsibility for his failure.

Promotion was out of the question; it was clear that he would instead lose his position. That realization caused panic to overtake the man, robbing him of the last of his logic. His one goal had become to cover up the result of his mission, so he brandished his Device, a hand axe, and approached the unconscious Ikki.

"Mhmhm! Wait just a moment there, Princess! Put that man down! He and I have a duel that we must attend to! You see, his planned opponent was not actually Touka Toudou—it was me! This is a man-to-man deal! Now, bring him over to me... Oh?"

Suddenly, Akaza lost sight of Stella, who had been standing directly in front of him. She had, unbeknownst to him, moved behind him.

No. It wasn't that simple; she had actually slipped into the voids in his consciousness. It was the ancient style of walking, Void Step. For someone at Stella's level, once she knew the basic principles behind it, it wasn't overly difficult to replicate it.

She had escaped Akaza's perception and carried Ikki past him, but not without knocking the barrel-man away with a backhanded blow.

"Hngaaaaahhh?!"

Akaza was thrown like he had been hit by a truck, flying through the blue gate, then bouncing over and over, like a rubber ball, into the middle of the arena.

“Whoa! There’s an old man in the ring!”

“The hell’s he doing? I feel like I’ve seen him before.”

“Look at his spine! It’s not supposed to bend like that, is it?”

“Eww, look at him spasming! Gross!”

“Is he alive?”

Stella heard some commotion coming from the stands, but she didn’t pay it any mind. She was already on her way to the infirmary to have Ikki treated by a doctor. Even the face of the man she had just smacked into oblivion had already disappeared from her mind.



An hour after the match, Touka finally recovered from the shock to her consciousness caused by the breaking of her Device, Narukami.

“Finally awake, Touka?”

“Do you feel all right? Hurt anywhere?”

She was lying in a bed, watched over by Uakata and Kanata. The sight told Touka everything she needed to know.

“Oh. Guess I lost, huh?” There was a gap in her memories beginning at the moment she swung her sword; the moment she fell did not exist within her mind. However, when she saw her friends’ consoling looks, it wasn’t hard for her to guess what happened. “And here I thought my Raikiri was unbeatable.”

“Master Nangou thought so too.”

“Master? Was he there?”

“Yep. Right, Kanata?”

“Yes. Since the battle was open to the public, he came to watch you fight.”

“He was really proud of you! He even said that was the most beautiful Raikiri

he had ever seen.”

...Really?

“If Master thinks so, then I guess I wasn’t mistaken in thinking so myself.”

She had used every last ounce of her power, yet Ikki Kurogane still surpassed her. Something still bothered her about it.

Kurogane moved even faster in that moment. In the space of a second, he had forced his limits to grow for the sole purpose of defeating Touka. She thought she had always kept aiming higher, but she realized that it was nothing compared to what Ikki was doing. The Worst One wasn’t just fighting against desperate odds in their duel, he was doing so every day. And every time he did, he continued to evolve. Perhaps her defeat had been a foregone conclusion. *What an incredible person. Things won’t be the same next time, though.*

The satisfying feeling left behind by Touka’s perfect Raikiri still lingered in her hands. That feeling taught her that she could still grow ever more. Someday, she would close the gap between them. Someday, she would surpass him. She would chase after him at full speed until the day they fought again, when it was her turn to challenge him.

“So, Touka...”

“Hm?”

Utakata started to speak suddenly. He had an uncomfortable look on his face, but when pressed, he asked his question.

“Should I call everyone at the Wakaba House?”

Oh. Right.

Touka remembered that they had gone so far as having made a banner for her. As difficult as it may have been, she had to let them know she’d lost. Utakata was willing to tell them in her place if the truth was too painful for her to tell, but regardless of the outcome, she had promised to go see them all after the selection battles were over.

“Thanks for worrying about me, but I’m okay. I should tell them myself.”

“You don’t have to act tough.”

Touka shook her head. She wasn't acting tough. In her full-power battle with Ikki, she had given all she had. She wasn't afraid to tell anyone about the Raikiri she had unleashed with so much resolve that she was prepared even to kill Ikki for her victory. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

"I'll go home with pride in my heart."

She would tell them about how she had fought a truly incredible knight.



Epilogue

Another One

After the duel, Ikki slept for a full week. With the fatigue from the inquiry, the poisoning from Akaza's drug, and the effect of Ittou Rasetsu on top of it all, it wasn't such a far-fetched outcome.

While the man himself slept soundly, the series of events that started the scandal was settled. That was a result of Stella's father, Emperor Vermillion, learning of the results of Ikki's duel and everything leading up to it. He declared his immense displeasure with the Ethics Committee and their tool, the mass media. Once the emperor had directly stated his displeasure with them, the news could do nothing but quiet down.

Finally, he announced that he would put off his decision regarding Ikki and Stella's relationship, demanding that Ikki come to the Vermillion Empire to meet him after the Seven Stars Battle Festival. Between those declarations and Akaza's subsequent fall from power, there was nobody left to doubt Ikki's qualifications as a knight.

With everything having reached its conclusion, the entire student body gathered in the usually rarely-used gymnasium for the formal swearing-in ceremony of the six students who would represent Hagun Academy after the long, long line of selection battles.

"We will now begin the ceremony. When your name is called, please come up to the stage," Kurono said, her voice projecting through the gymnasium. Then, she began reading the names of each student. "Year 1, Rank A: Stella Vermillion. Year 3, Rank D: Botan Hagure. Year 3, Rank B: Kanata Toutokubara. Year 3, Rank C: Kikyuu Hagure. Year 1, Rank D: Nagi Alisuin... is unable to be here, it seems. Year 1, Rank F: Ikki Kurogane."

"Ma'am."

Ikki replied quickly and stood when his name was called, climbing the stairs next to him to go onstage. Then, like the four before him, he walked in front of Director Kurono Shinguuji to receive a certificate and a medal.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you very much.”

He bowed, and the five representatives lined up together in front of the entire school body as the school’s representatives. Once Kurono saw that Ikki was lined up with them, she continued.

“The five you see before you all—six, including Nagi Alisuin—are now officially recognized as Hagun Academy’s representatives for the Seven Stars Battle Festival!”

The audience welcomed the five people onstage with roaring applause. Everyone was looking right at Ikki and the other representatives.

In battle, he didn’t care about other people looking at him. He wasn’t in battle, however, and was anything but used to being the center of attention to receive positive recognition, so he felt especially awkward. He was the type of person who didn’t especially care about other people’s opinions of him or his social status, so he was unsure of how to handle himself during such ceremonies. He really just wanted to get off the stage.

“Next, I will announce the team captain. When I call your name, step forward. The leader will be Year 1, Rank F Ikki Kurogane.”

As if acting specifically against Ikki’s desires, Kurono once again called his name.

“...Huh?” Ikki was shocked beyond belief that he was named captain, unintentionally turning toward Kurono. He had expected that the more experienced student council member, Kanata, or the talk of the town, Stella, would be chosen as captain. “I’m the leader? Wh-Why?”

“Obviously, yes,” Kurono said, giving him an annoyed look. “The Hunter, Runner’s High, even Raikiri; you defeated all of the school’s Seven Stars frontrunners one after another. Who else here would be more fitting to be the captain of Hagun’s representatives? Now step forward, would you?”

“O-Oh, uh, yes, ma’am.”

Ikki still wasn’t convinced. As he had lived his life outside of the spotlight, the role of leader was one he had never played before. He was left unable to do anything but panic, until Kurono’s harsh tone forced him to reflexively step forward. She then continued the ceremony.

“Now, the team captain will be given the school’s flag.” With that, a single female student carried the flag to Ikki from offstage. It was the girl he had beaten in his final battle. “Student council president, Touka Toudou.”

“I haven’t seen you since the match. I’m glad you’re doing better.” Touka smiled slightly and lifted the school’s flag. “This is the flag I was given as last year’s team captain. I was planning to carry it again this year, but then I lost to you, Kurogane. I asked the faculty to let me give this to you personally.”

When he heard that, Ikki was at a loss for words. Touka must have already sorted out her feelings about the match, because she looked completely fine.

As for Ikki, who had just woken up, he still felt like their battle was just the day before. He had no idea what he should say to the person he had knocked out of the running. However, despite his lack of a suitable response, he at least knew that he wanted to thank her.

Despite the filth and evil that had permeated their fight, she still fought him unreservedly, like a proud knight. It was because she was there that he had been able to draw so much strength from within.

“Toudou, I... I could only fight at full power because you were my opponent, because I wanted to win against you specifically. If I hadn’t been up against you, then I’m sure—”

“Kurogane.” She interrupted him, and gave him a gentle look. “Ikki Kurogane, to be victorious is to carry a burden. You’re carrying the aspirations of the people who failed against you. This flag is a symbol of the hopes and dreams of so many students who wanted to represent the school, but couldn’t. I’m not telling you to fight for us, but please, take this flag so that we can be there the moment you take the Seven Stars.”

Touka held the flag out to Ikki. Hearing her words and seeing that flag, he

finally understood that he didn't need words; there was only one way to repay the girl in front of him and all the other knights who fought only to have their dreams crushed. He would bear the burden of their hopes through his victory.

What did Ikki have to do, then, as the victor? He wasn't one to not recognize what was required of him, so he firmly grasped the black flagpole that was offered to him.

"...I promise that I will."

The moment he said that, the gymnasium erupted into applause.

"You can do it, Captaaaain!"

"We'll definitely come cheer you on!"

"You beat the president! That makes you our representative!"

"We know you can take the top, Ikkiiii!"

"Don't you dare lose, Another One!"

Voices of support, cheers of blessing, cries of encouragement. So many different voices were mixed into the applause, slamming into Ikki. The shock of it sent a shiver down his spine. He tightened his lips, stiffening his face. It was the only thing he could do to stop himself from crying.

With his face still stiffened, Ikki raised the flag in response to their cheers and returned to his own spot in line. He then whispered to Stella, standing next to him.

"...Stella."

"Yeah?"

"To be honest... I've never really cared about anyone else's opinions. Nobody's ever thought anything positive of me, so I figured it was just impossible. I always thought I just needed to get to the point where I could accept myself. But being accepted by others like this is... surprisingly nice."

Ikki could no longer tell if he was smiling or crying. But when Stella looked at him, she smiled happily, so he knew that he must have been making some sort of cheerful face.

Thus, Hagun Academy, situated in the southern area of Japan's Kanto region, had its Seven Stars Battle Festival representatives.

Following them, northern Kanto's Donrou Academy, Tohoku's Kyomon Academy, Hokkaido's Rokuzon Academy, Kyushu and Okinawa's Bunkyo Academy, Chugoku and Shigoku's Rentei Academy, and finally, the strongest school in Japan and a leading powerhouse worldwide, having reached the finals at the Seven Stars for the past twenty years and with a monopoly on the top spot for each of the past five, Kinki and Chubu's Bukyoku Academy, all announced their own representatives one after another.

The actors were all taking the stage: Kyomon's Icy Sneer, Mikoto Tsuruya; Rokuzon's Grizzly Panther, Renji Kaga; Donrou's Sword Eater, Kuraudo Kurashiki; the current champion of the Festival, the Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi.

Every one of those knights was famous throughout Japan, and Ikki Kurogane was headed to the Festival, where they awaited him. There, he would fight for the opportunity to stand at the pinnacle of the Seven Stars, and where he would fulfill the vow he made to his strongest rival of all, the Crimson Princess.

His story had progressed to the national stage.

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Meanwhile, while Hagun Academy's swearing-in ceremony was underway, something else was taking place beneath a desolate expressway.

"Heheheh. Looks like Hagun's order has been solidified as well. Quite surprising that neither Raikiri, Runner's High, nor Lorelei made it into the lineup."

"Hardly their fault. Two of them simply fell victim to bad luck."

"Well, luck is another part of skill. If the luck of the draw is enough to make you lose, that just shows what kind of knight you are. Doesn't that sound like something Ouma would say to you?"

"I don't especially care."

"Wow, cold. Well, whatever. I suppose your preparations are complete?"

“Yes, without issue. Lorelei’s fall was unexpected, but it won’t interfere with the plan. I can dispose of her at any time.”

“Heheheh. You really are the master of masters when it comes to assassination. Your skill is on another level. But what else would I expect from the Black Assassin, who cleared the Killing House with a record-breaking high score? Or I suppose you’re the Black Rose now, Comrade Alisuin?”

“ ... ”

Alisuin’s cold expression bore no resemblance to the kind one she wore around Ikki and his group. She hardly appeared to be a human with emotions, more closely resembling glasswork; one might have even mistaken her for a different person. That in itself gave her a certain dangerous beauty that one might even describe as lurid.



“Either way, this means that preparations for the eve of the Festival are complete.” Chuckling as if to mock the world, the person on the other end of the line connected to Alisuin’s student handbook—clearly not one from Hagun Academy—spoke with ecstasy in their voice. “The actors are all present. I assume that’s what everyone thinks. But they’re mistaken; the star has yet to appear. Nobody knows of the star’s existence, so it’s up to us to show them. We’ll steal onstage from under the curtain, find the fool who thinks himself to be the star, and smack him in the face, revealing this truth to the world: The star of this Seven Stars Battle Festival is us, the Akatsuki.”

With the stage having moved to a national scale, the story began anew, accompanied by the eerie, creeping sound of wickedness.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume three of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. I'm the author, Riku Misora.

This volume marks the climax of the Selection Battle Arc. Even I, the author, tore through this book from the excitement. Did you enjoy it? I'm currently patting myself on the back for writing something exciting enough that I could shamelessly call it a true climax, so I can only hope that you, my readers, will also find this volume to be exciting.

Excuse me for changing the subject, but with volume two, the *Chivalry of a Failed Knight* series has reached a total of one hundred thousand sales. I have to offer my gratitude to all of my readers for making it possible. Honestly, thank you so much for reading and supporting me! Thanks to you all, I've finally completed the Selection Battle Arc and begun the next step, the Nationals Arc. Of course, this is entirely thanks to your support.

In the fourth volume, many people—from the famed greats to the evil shadows lurking behind them—will all move on the summit of the Seven Stars simultaneously. I'll be working hard to bring you even stronger foes and even more heated battles, so I hope for your continued support!

Now, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped me make this book.

Won, thank you as always for your wonderful illustrations. Even with a tight schedule, you fulfilled all of my requests. I am eternally grateful to you. All the skin in this volume's illustrations had my mouth watering, and it's my exclusive right as the writer to declare that as my number-one most appreciated thing (haha)! I'm always looking forward to your next ones.

To my lead editor, Mr. Ohara, and to everyone in the editorial staff who worked to make this happen, I thank you deeply.

Finally, I must once again thank everyone who read this book. Let's meet

again in volume four!

Riku Misora

Illust Won



Chivalry of a Failed Knight 3

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